BADLANDS
Badlands is published annually by the Palm Desert Campus of California State University, San Bernardino. Copyright © 2012. Badlands is a bilingual literary journal that publishes original creative work in Spanish and English, and original translations from Spanish and Latin American Literature. The editors are students at the Palm Desert Campus of CSUSB. The publication is made possible by funds from the Instructionally Related Programs Board.

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Badlands reading period begins in January and concludes in April each year. Questions? Email Stephen Lehigh: badlandseditor@gmail.com

Badlands publishes photography and visual art, both on the cover and inside the issue.

Please send your visual art submissions in high resolution JPEG files (300dpi).

Badlands is currently seeking submissions of writing and visual art by combat veterans of the United States Armed Forces. Submissions may include: Poetry, Fiction or Non-fiction, Letters and Journal entries (typed, scanned, or photocopied) photographs, paintings or sketches, including sketches that accompany journal entries. Our feature on Veterans’ Art will not include any editorial opinion (on our part) about American wars; the art will speak for itself.

Cover photograph: Kabul Prospect #1, by Liam Corley.

Jean Le Pautre’s, Plenarium, The Siege, Courtesy of the Riverside Art Museum.

The Stories “Tri-City Meats” and “Coda” were selected by independent judges (not the Badlands editorial board) as winners of the 2012 Desert Literary Society Fiction Award. Each year Badlands honors the winner(s) of the award with Publication.
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War comes to visit me once a day.
I can't get rid of him.
He's grown old and hates himself.
I stopped a quarter century ago,
but he still drinks -- sits in airport bars
and watches the cocky uniforms
line up at the departure gates.
Desert camouflage this time, tan boots.
He orders another double and snickers,
little eyes set close together
in too large a head, like a grizzly's,
opaque and dead. Flies swarm
around his gore-smeared muzzle.
He stinks of corpse. I let him sleep in the garage.
You see, there's no way to make him leave.
Go to war just once, he's always with you.
At breakfast he feels like he's got
an ice-pick in his head, swears off the stuff.
Never again, he says, I've found God.
By five he's back in the blood glow of the bar,
bumping drinks and telling lies.
He's got an eye for boys and girls
with wallets full of combat pay.
He'll Mickey Finn them,
roll them for their souls and go off giggling.
I see Senator Goldmouth weaving down
the bar to slap him on the back:
Let freedom ring! Says he,
teeth twinkling from the neon at the bar.
ANNE KAIER

Squatting in short grass
under russet trees
at noon in the
country graveyard,
I smell the sun and
comfort broken husks that
once held seed.

Caught like Gulliver,
strung by steel in the
threads of daily life,
I long to fall from the branch,
crack on the forest floor,
mauve, moist, seedy,
like old Dutch fruit.
Do You Want To Go Shopping

JILLIAN WEISE

We could go for the panties
7 pairs for $27

I’d tell you which ones
look good on you

psychedelic plaid
w/ ruffles on the waist

patriotic polka dots
the whale print is very

what’s his name again?
oh right, melville

those look good on you
those too, those also

I could see you
wearing those in his truck

out past the Esso station
to the field party

that one time
you got drunk

& fucked around
w/ some of his friends
& he cracked 12 beers
& felt old & drove

to the cemetery
& pissed on yr father’s grave

here he comes round
the corner –

Are you still writing
about her? he says

I hope you’re not
still writing about her

If we went shopping
I mean today dammit

you could ask me why
I slept w/ him

then push me
into the hangers & hook

I’m not supposed
to try you on anymore

the dead walk into poems
all the time

nobody complains
thin

CONNIE A. LOPEZ-HOOD

a flowering plum waved lean branches ripped at its own budding could not stretch
tall, thin tensed root muscles while at rest hushed birds, hushed leaves from the
settle, from the rustle a restrain pinched at its own split nodes, open sores cracking
thirsted for drought a purge on aphids, suckling bark beetle counted skeletal switch
rings cut its own blossoms with the boned edge of famine no one ever wrote a poem
about famine
California Green

PETER LABERG

After a trip to Stanford University

wisps of brown hair entangling in the solitary reeds
negate the childhood, high school sweethearts

i’ve harvested in this meridian fog
precipitation erupting on my way out of town,

the windshield wipers smearing, all i can
see is the blur of tears: neither happy nor sad.

pine trees shed green tears on the side of the
road, and i stop to admire the branches,

the branches are greener than anything i
have ever seen jump out of

postcards, and the silhouettes waving the california
mountains in vain against the sky’s clouds swollen like

bruised feet after ballet. i feel my mother’s kiss still
smoldering, etched into my cheek—

i hear her tears sparking the phone wire
when they lean over her cheeks

like children over cliffs,
like children she let go.
It is astonishing to see
a mother quail and little chicks
at forage and at play among
the leaves and weeds in sunlight, young
no bigger than your thumb and free
within the hen’s magnetic hold.
But if they catch a hint of you
or any other living thing
the mother veers away as though
she’s lame or hurt, and when you look
the chicks have vanished so complete –
as if absorbed into the dirt
or beamed into another sphere –
you wonder if you saw them there,
or dreamed they peeped just at your feet.
Shelter

ROBERT MORGAN

The hammering on the barn next door goes on and on hour after hour day after day. The knocks at first like cracks and smacks become more blunt and resonant as work proceeds and blows made higher in the air with walls to amplify the strokes reach farther out across the fields between that place and here. The bangs create accompaniment, a bass of background drumming for our day, not regular as pulse or heart, but syncopated, fast at times then slower and relaxed, a beat that’s tied to pace of effort as the structure grows with every lick and nail and shining piece of pine to make a house for horses, hay, as music makes a home in time, each step of our long labor to construct the fabric of a day.
Why my Abuela Vicky grew Chiles

MELISA GARCIA

While playing in my grandmother’s backyard I saw a small placard hanging from a chili branch that read—Para Jose. She had a special area in her garden, guarded by a white fence where the red and green chiles were lined from smallest to biggest. She never let anyone break any off to eat. Two days later I noticed she had moved a small chiles branch to plant it in the red vase. She then set them next to the orange tulips she’d cut from her garden. I asked her why she’d placed them there, next to the tulips and she answered—so they’ll go crazy.

As the days passed, the red chiles hanged loosely, ready to fall on the flowered table cloth. When she noticed this, she’d snap them off at night and placed them inside a folded paper towel. When she saw them the next morning they had severed and ants trailed alongside them. She hid them in the pockets of her apron, and snapping them with her hand. The sound reminded her of what she thought she had planted.
Jennifer, a fourth grader, started wearing a dive helmet to school—you know the old brass ones that the little plastic fish tank figurines wear—because she was afraid the air might turn into water one day. The thing, a cheap plastic replica, was easily three sizes too big and made her look like someone had taken a bike pump to her head. Her teacher, Ms. Tinley, tried to remove it once and only once. The second Ms. Tinley laid her hands on it, Jennifer begun the screaming fit to end all screaming fits. The mousy girl’s baleful cries reverberated inside the helmet and sounded as if the world were deflating. Ms. Tinley tried to have the school’s security guard, Officer Reynolds or Concrete as he was known to the sixth-graders, try and take the helmet off. But a boy on Jennifer’s block taught her the word *rape*, which has the power to make grown-ups leave you alone. Before Concrete could even touch her, Jennifer starting yelping rape! rape! and he immediately put his hands up to prove to Ms. Tinley and the other twenty-four students in the classroom that he was in fact not raping anyone. After that, Jennifer started getting sent home from school whenever she arrived with the helmet on.

*You can’t keep doing this Jenny,* her mother told her as they drove back home from school. She was unabashedly smoking in the car, figuring the plastic helmet would prevent Jennifer from ingesting any secondhand smoke. *Do you want to be known as ‘the helmet girl’ for the rest of your life? Don’t you want to make friends?*
But Jennifer wasn’t listening. She was watching the trees bloom and blur through the plastic window on the front of the helmet, make-believing they were primordial anemones swaying in the suck of an ocean current.

One night in her bedroom, Jennifer heard the round, muffled vibrations of her mother screaming. She inspected all four corners of the ceiling to make sure it was not dripping water anywhere, then hesitantly removed the dive helmet. She closed her eyes and drew a deep breath in through her nose, as if to acclimate herself to unplasticized oxygen. She crawled to where her bed met the adjoining wall and pressed her head against it to listen.

*I can’t do this anymore!* her mother yelled into the phone. *Your daughter is going to give me a fucking aneurysm.* There was a long pause. *She won’t stop wearing that dumb mask you bought her and she won’t talk to me and they won’t let her back at school and…* Her mother started crying softly.

Jennifer fell away from the wall and lay in bed on her back. Her mother eventually stopped crying and the house became still, quiet enough for Jennifer to hear the thud of rain clobbering the roof. She sprung out of bed and dashed to the window and looked down to the front yard. The streetlight illuminated a spout of water gushing up from a chip in a manhole cover. She thought of a boat’s spotlight fixed on the blowhole of a breeching whale. Jennifer calmly grabbed the helmet from off her dresser and pulled it down over her tiny head. She stood like a scuba-diving mannequin in the window watching the rain, repeating silently in the safety of her helmet, *This is it. This is it.*
August

TIM KRCMARIK

Is how you describe a line of poetry where desire is a snowy egret in shallow green water,

perched with perfect equipoise despite the blue gill flapping in her long yellow clutch,

and not at all how you describe the soiree I happen by tonight having come out to view the August moon.

Though to be fair to the AΔΠ’s, I’m flattered when a perky little sprite nursing her gallon jug of what smells like

7-Up and turpentine hands me a fishbowl margarita with a high five and a primal scream,

having mistaken me, presumably, for the younger version of myself who years ago would have heard her

exotic mating call and responded in kind. For this mistake she will reign over some lesser but still very treasured
kingdom of my heart forever,
the sort of minor utopia where each year
on the cusp of Autumn

a great festival is held honoring Youth
as it prepares to buckle down for a bitter Winter
studying vast and complex engines

that make the world spin,
a good old fashioned orgy flooded with cheap
wine and thunderous song,

and a swarm of firebreathing egrets
unleashed the following day at dawn
to chase every Peter Pan and Tinkerbell

into the library where they belong.
Divorcée’s New Year

LAUREN HENLEY

4 a.m. in the lobby
of Hotel Congress

4 a.m.
in many places
but this is the only place
I can be sure of

I will give up the night
with-
out a kiss will watch you my close friend
kiss my roommate     Chris

You my close friend deserve the world
if the world is what you want
dropping
like the ball in Time Square on the square
box
above the bar

What do they call it

Television
Television prevents me from going out most nights

chains me to my bed most nights

feeds me pureed cauliflower night
after night
until the only words I love are *primetime*
and *cauliflower* Call a flower
it's beautiful like cancer

the word I mean
when you draw out the vowels

I would never hurt you and you don’t
need to know this but

I’ve had lots of whisky and rum

The thing is that you two kiss so well and I’m so god-damned alone
I’ve thought of a threesome

for the first time in my life
and no offense but neither of you are that attractive

It was a very quick thought a jackrabbit a whiskey slid across
the wet bar kind of thought

And now it is blurrier
than
my face in the rusty mirror in the hall that leads
to my hotel room

more cold than
for example
the moments lying awake
next to a man
I’ve come to hate
having just lied about needing him more than water
more confusing than seeing my left leg
on the wrong side of the balcony’s ledge
my red toenails skimming the air
four stories
above the street

wondering
where is the other leg
why does it always insist on staying
L’Accident
after Felix Vallotton’s L’Accident

A.N. TEIBE

L’Accident
after Felix Vallotton’s L’Accident

Frozen pull-back from reins
blinders still on, the horse doesn’t see
the four-buttoned driver tug,
top hat momentum-lurched forward

brim to mustache. Not at all a neigh—
a jaw-open squeal. Her face doesn’t want to believe.
Today’s herbs for market street-flung,
fore hoof-ground. The let of green wets the dirt.

Muddy, carriage-mussed road, feign
of civility. The butcher’s white coat, bloody
hands grab side tack and cart rung,
his heft holding back the inevitable. Her black skirt

coming up, knees just covered by cloak. When
will the second hoof fall? A plume-headed lady
pulls her child away, but points. Horse dung,
dust. The pleats of her calico dress neat, his sailor suit.

A moment trapped in pause of air—the watch, the turn away, the run
to help. Pull down, pull back. The wicker basket at her crook of elbow stays
still. Out of view: the bowler hat man’s turned face, shame-drawn.
Stopped: the crush of knee joint to head. Stuck: her open mouth.
Silent: her eyelet laced boots.
Cozy

ALEX LEMON

A little lumber, a little scalding—
I sing lullabies to myself
In the dark I’ve told this

To no one Your exact
& beautiful too much I promise
Not to swagger into the next

Life God Damn I sing
Lullabies to myself in the dark
My hands opening Sorry

I say Pennies warm beneath
My tongue I’ve told this
Beautiful too much Singing

Lullabies to myself in the dark God
Damn I promise I’ve told
A little scalding & lumber & no one
Sticks and Bits of Twine

MARIA TEUTSCH

I am made of bird spit,
sticks,
and bits of twine.
I am an eggshell
spotted and slick--
warm underneath my mother.

Hiding in reeds, like baby Moses--
flying, pinion wings tilt--
and I splat, blobs and blobs
where water wobbles.

The crack is in your left tibia,
the crack is an alligator’s egg,
the crack is its open maw--
your big bad ass SUV,
your child at war.

Turtles who know something about truth
are dead now,
the silver fishes in poems
are dead now,
the ocean has leukemia and it is contagious.

Here’s your blue plague in the iris of a blue fin tuna,
here’s your black plague all over my fins,
the milk my baby sucks is turpentine.
And, here’s a vast canvas, 
a swath of ducks trying to get up, 
keep warm, not die.

I smash each egg, 
dolphin skull, 
seal, and water lily, 
I paint all of the Monets 
in the National Gallery black.

Beauty pumps through my veins, 
my webbed feet. My toenails 
are blackened half-moons, 
and they are, 
they are not, 
beautiful.
the white lines have gone ghostly. time flows backwards. beneath the moonless star-strewn sky, the drive ahead is endless. my lover nods beside me in the passenger’s seat. i feel our last coupling in my skin. i turn the dial until i pick up a stream of oldies from the 1940s, Miller and Ellington. under the rhythms i hear the whistle and whoosh of a Chinook. there’s water in the thermos, wine in the cooler. my hands grip then release the steering wheel. there’s a dull throb deep in the bone. oncoming lights blind me with each passing vehicle. the too-bright lamps behind us blind me until the tailgater passes on the left. we’re an eternity from home, somewhere east of the Rockies. road buddies don’t last long. the motels have cable but no vacancies. the viewpoint rests are dark and full of semi-trailer trucks. i don’t want to stop until closer to journey’s end. i fight exhaustion, grateful for the courage to go on, grateful for the excess caffeine in my veins as we speed onward and upward
you drive dark unfamiliar roads as if
you’ve lived them before. follow the scenic
curves with cool grace. the engine is quiet
the tires float. you grip the steering wheel

smartly with your left hand, sip the hot black brew
gingerly from the thermal cup in your right.

the stereo issues your favorite
songs/the sounds of a bygone era when

shadows were plentiful and fading out
was an art. you meditate randomly in an effort
to blot out the violences and hard words.
you try not to see a certain face. you try not to

remember how it felt to be held in certain
arms. you seek to divert yourself, contemplate

a cigarette or stick of gum. there’s nothing
in the dashboard nook or clipped to the sun visor

setting the java aside and reaching for the glove
compartment seems too great a stretch. suddenly

there’s an edginess aboard. it circles the cabin
and settles in your teeth. you know, don’t you?
know for certain what you’ve done. and now
the ghost of it takes form and substance, rides
beside you in the passenger’s seat. you refuse
to give it a name. it names itself/dares you to believe
it has more power than you want to give it.
it accuses and indicts. it names you the idiot.
if you had the nerve, you’d park and give it all
the attention it deserves. but you can’t. knowing
holds you back. you drive on, certain it can’t be killed.
A Clean Kill in an Orange Grove

SEAN DAVIS

I had never killed anyone before, and even being there in the middle of a war I didn’t particularly feel like I ever wanted to. So many other things took up my time and attention. The heat for one, Bobadilla had a thermometer sent to him from his brother as some sort of joke, but he would carry it around in an ammo pouch anyway. Ever few hours or so he would take it out, shake it, and tell us the temperature in a thick Colombian accent then say, “Whoo, man. I swear to you, that is an oven setting back home.”

My hair was always wet and smashed to my head even when I took my helmet off. Beads and drops pooled and soaked into my uniform where my ass and back rested against the Humvee seat. Sweat turned to white patches of salt in direct sunlight. Fine dust kicked up from hundreds of vehicles on the road stuck to every wet spot making all of us itch constantly and everything smelled like diesel exhaust, always. Whenever I got a second to hit the phone trailers, someone back home would ask me what war was like. I always said the same thing: it itched, smelled like diesel, tasted like stale coffee, and it was hotter than hell.

We started out in the Green Zone but three months ago we moved north to a base the old regime used to fix tanks. Every time we headed out the South Gate for a mission we passed rows and rows of broken tanks. I always thought of an elephant graveyard, but most places around that base reminded me of graveyard. Even the walls of the houses looked like big tombstones.
Sergeant McGillen pounded on my door early that morning, which I didn't mind because if we left early I thought we would come back early too, but last night’s mortar attack hit the mess hall and three of the Arkansas National Guard boys were killed instantly, five more wounded. The colonel sent us out with a few other squads to find the shitheads who shot the rounds and none of us were returning to base until someone found something.

We knew what we were looking for, but we also knew we would never find it. The shitheads welded metal racks to the beds of small Toyota trucks. They fastened PVC Pipe at an angle into the rack to act as mortar tubes and would drive the truck within a mile from base but far enough not to be seen. They would park so the tubes were all facing our base. It only took ten or fifteen minutes for the shitheads to get two, maybe three, barrages of mortars off at us and then load up and drive away. They never knew where the mortars would land or who they were trying to kill. Most the time the rounds didn’t hit anyone, but some days they did.

At noon Bobadilla told us it had hit 123 degrees, so hot that the blue drained right from the sky leaving it a pale shade of what it had been. After patrolling the west part of our AO all morning we were heading east on a dirt road we called Hajji Highway. All the dust we kicked up coated the tall grass ash white for ten feet on either side of the road. An irrigation ditch ran parallel along side us. There were always irrigation ditches full of stagnant water running along the roads.

It surprised the hell out of me to find the people around base made their living as farmers in that climate. Nothing beautiful grew there, not to my eyes. The orange trees that fought against the heat and drought sprouted up all bony and twisted like witches fingers and I couldn’t imagine the fruit tasting anything but bitter. Even the palm trees looked to suffer for their existence in that heat.

The explosion was sudden, violent, and came without warning. I saw it happen before hearing the explosion and that lapse of reason made it unreal, like maybe it wasn’t happening. I saw the ground open like a giant beast’s maw underneath Ronnie’s Humvee then it was lost in a dark cloud of cordite-smoke, dirt, and fire. The sound of the blast smacked me hard, spun my helmet cock-ways, and I could feel it bounce around in my skull turning everything else to a high-pitched screech.
The dark cloud swallowed everything. The small arms fire started: flashes in the black all around me. The big gun popped off five to seven rounds at a time, a sound so loud each beat shook my heart. I sprinted toward Ronnie’s screams with my M4 at the ready until I heard the platoon sergeant yell the triggermen were on the north side of the ditch. I turned and jumped in without thinking about it. The water sloshed through my boots, pants, and came all the way up to my chest before I got across. Bobadilla, Stak, and Johnson followed me across.

I didn’t see anything of the triggermen in front of me but maybe a flash of one of their white dishdalas. I could hear them crashing through the twisted branches of the orange trees only feet ahead of me. Firing at people running away just didn’t seem right so I didn’t pull the trigger. Forty pounds of equipment and body armor weighed me down but I needed to keep my legs pumping. It only took five minutes for them to pull away and I could barely hear the sounds of them running. I lasted a good quarter of a mile at least, but had to stop. My breathing came so hard and fast it felt like the air scraped the inside of my throat. Sprinting in that heat with that weight could very well kill a person.

The shitheads we were after could run all day and knew every rock, hole and palm tree when it all looked the same to us. Hell, they all looked the same to us. There was no way to tell the enemy from the people we were told to protect. Even the innocent people had AK47s in their houses.

I bent at the waste in the shade of a tree and took deep breaths until my team caught up. The air was so hot it burnt the inside of my lungs. I let the men have five minutes to drink from their canteens before we set out in a light jog with our weapons at the ready.

Fifteen minutes later we busted out of the grove into an open field. A man in his forties whipped mercilessly at an old donkey tied to a rusted and weathered plow. And the donkey pulled against the pain and heat to turn the big chunks of hard dirt to smaller ones. The sour smell of citrus filled my chest and I attempted to roar, but my raw throat only cracked and nothing came. I leveled my rifle at his chest and walked at him with murder in my head.

When I was five feet from him I repeated one of the phrases from the language book I was issued that meant get down on your stomach. “Nem ala batnak.”
The man’s eyes stretched with fear and wrinkles ran from each of them like spider webs. I didn’t see the boy behind him until the old man threw his hands in the air and backed up. The young man was old enough to learn about farming but not in his teens yet.

“Get the fuck down now!” Johnson yelled from over my shoulder. Johnson had bunked with Ronnie until a month ago when Ronnie was moved to Third Squad.

The old man looked at me, but I didn’t know why. Maybe he thought I would stop Johnson from shaming him in front of the boy, maybe he believed I could understand his complaints as he was thrown to the ground, or maybe he wanted me to assure the boy everything was going to be alright.

I couldn’t do anything about any of it. Johnson dug his kneecap right into the old man’s spine in order to keep him from fighting too much while Bobadilla and Stak searched him. Dignity was just another casualty when it came to combat, but pride was as big a part of the old man’s culture as his god. Johnson pulled the man’s dishdalla up and searched up and down the old man’s legs, crotch, and back. When the old man struggled Johnson pushed his face into the dirt and he stopped struggling when he realized he couldn’t breathe dirt. Johnson finished the search and looked at me. “He’s got to know something. He could have been one of the triggermen.”

I was mad too, but not mad enough to ignore reason. “He blew up the IED, shot at us, and then ran here to plow his field? Come on, Johnson.”

“I’m telling you, he knows something.” Johnson looked down at him and pushed his face in the dirt again. The man’s legs kicked and twisted.

“Knock that shit off.”

“For all we know Ron is dead,” Stak said staring down at the man.

“Yeah, well we don’t know, and we don’t know this man had anything to do with it. Let him up so we can Charlie Mike after the real triggermen.”

We left without another word. I looked back a few times to see the man still sitting in the same spot looking after us as the boy cried. Why didn’t he hug the kid? He kept his glare on us and didn’t even try to stand up.

We walked for another ten minutes but found most of the adrenaline from the initial blast defused after the incident with the man and boy. Without the adrenaline our equipment pulled us down and the heat sapped our strength. We had already been gone from our unit without radio contact for too long. I gave the hand and arm signal to turn back and without a word or
change in anyone’s facial expression the whole squad changed direction back toward the road.

When we returned to the field the old man and boy were gone. The bent-back donkey sat chewing at the roots of a twisted tree, didn’t even look up at us. We crossed the field without a word, back into the orange grove. My vision blurred a little around the edges like it tended to do on the hottest days. Sweat pooled in my eye sockets so I rubbed it out. A cramp crept up my right leg so I stopped in the shade of a tree. We drank water. The men did this in turn to maintain security. I drank last.

When the gunfire started I had no idea where it came. Each shot bounced off of every tree in the orchard. I slammed my body down with my head on a swivel but didn’t see anything but sunrays breaking through tree branches and my canteen two feet away on its side. Water poured in gushes into the cracked ground. I grabbed it quickly, put the top on, and stuck it back into its pouch.

“Give me a direction and distance,” I yelled. “Anyone hit?”

No one spoke. Smart. They didn’t want to give away their position, not knowing who was out there. I crawled up to the base of a tree and looked at each man’s face until they were all accounted for. We all waited on our stomachs facing south behind trees for cover. Every second hung thick between us. My heartbeat steadily became louder until I couldn’t hear anything else.

Then, only thirty feet to my right, a blur of white popped up behind a root-clump. How could he have been so close and not hit us? Unless he didn’t mean to hit us.

The whole team screamed, “Three o’clock, ten meters.”

The world stopped turning and the air went stale. I meant to pop up to a knee but I couldn’t make my body move as fast as my mind. The man’s head whipped back with wide eyes, but before I could recognize him as the old man I saw the barrel of the AK-47 spin toward me. My training kicked in and in an instant I decided he wasn’t trying to throw the gun down. Instead I took his actions to mean he was attempting to fire at us again. I saw every drop of spit illuminated by the sun as they flew from his screaming mouth.

I raised my rifle and pulled the trigger three times. The white dishdalla popped away from his chest as each round hit. The blood didn’t start to soak into the cloth until he hit the ground.
A stampede of boots and equipment passed me and ran to the tangled body on the ground. I walked slowly until I stood over it. The face stretched in a grimace of pain, mouth open, tongue falling on a clump of dirt. No final words, no dignity.

“I told you we should have popped him when we were searching him,” Johnson said.

“The kid, eleven o’clock, fifty meters,” Stak yelled.

And there he was, the boy, with tears in his eyes, biting the palm of his hand, crying into the base of an orange tree. He had no weapon.

“Leave him be,” I said. “We need to head back, double time and tell the platoon what happened.”

“We’re just going to leave him here?” Stak asked and I could tell by his face that even though he was staring down at the body he was looking through him, not at him.

“You going to carry him?” Johnson switched out the magazine in his rifle for a full one.

There were no words on the way back to the road, only the rattling of our equipment. Words wouldn’t do anything about it. The old man didn’t pull the trigger, but his son soon would. I pushed my helmet back to wipe the sweat from my forehead. The heat was miserable, and there was nothing to do about that either. All I wanted was to get back to the air-conditioned trailer for a few hours of rest before the sun comes up again and we were sent back out.
The Drunken Ninja is a Myth

CAMERON SCOTT

The road a ribbon of ice.
I stop once to take a leak.
Twice to break my wipers clean.
To unclench my hands from the wheel.
With the defroster on high
I can barely see through the chatter
of freezing rain
but for some reason I remember
Tijuana, taking a wrong turn,
and yelling. I remember yelling again
when I found you overfilling
the tires. I remember the way I didn’t yell
when you dropped the clutch
so hard in reverse
the ball bearings fell out
and the clutch stuck
and unstuck, whined
and un-whined all the way down
through the wind scoured valley,
ribbons of VHS tape,
dust, dead leaves.
It reminds me of the way
I don’t yell now.
Semi! Semi! Mini-van!
El Camino!
It reminds me you are the unknown.
The world is incomplete
without your head resting on my chest,
your soft brown curls.
I am drowning! I am floating!
I am driving on a ribbon of ice
past slow moving vehicles
through a world I think I know.
But I won’t ever know.
It isn’t a plough or a truck
spitting down gravel.
It isn’t a set of traction devices
or four wheel drive.
It won’t tow you out of ditches
or whisk you away in an ambulance.
Hours ahead: ice. Hours behind: ice.
Trees, cattails, guardrails,
coated in ice. Sometimes a bird
flies too slowly across the road.
Has lost its sense of timing.
Has no rhythm at all.
I will die somewhere in New York City
on a cold night,
black flowers will grow from the ground
and the moon will be nailed to the sky
interrupted by fashion ads and l-e-d lights.

In the final hours
I will feel roads inside me
twisting and turning, like knots,
to find only a dead end, no way out.

I will die
wearing my black leather boots,
a pack of cigarettes on the inside
of my worn sports-coat,
a Las Vegas lighter in my pocket—
one cigarette left,
turned upside-down,
the lucky one.

I want to “people watch” before I ship off
to the next life,
the next chapter,
pay attention to the way they move
their legs,
to the way they tug
on their shirts,
to the way they finger
their cell phones
when crossing the street.
Simple things like this to remind me
of how easy life could have been,
of how the human body
is always in constant motion.
It will then be my turn to gasp
for that one last breath,
for one more memory
before it fades forever—
but my heart dead long ago
somewhere in Mexico.

I need my family to find
my hidden poems about themselves
inside my laptop,
the password unknown to all
but hidden underneath
my Tiffany & Co. porcelain jewelry box.
Words I could not say to them
will be in capital letters,
some in bold and some in italics,
but in a language unintelligible to them—
click, tab, click click—
but nothing will be found,
only a bunch of poems
which they will have no interest in,
they won’t even bother looking into them.
Luis Lopez-Maldonado ha muerto.
He will be found with one arm missing
or maybe a leg,
a gold rosary around his neck,
his face half smashed, half open.
His wallet will be missing,
his watch cracked
along with his wrist
and his invisible wings
will lay limp with holes
hovering over him—
“fly like a bird and fade away.”
Engine Room
after Daniel Goines’ Metropolis
A.N. TEIBE

bolt-jointed monster of machine      gear-worthy click
of cog
spin of wheel-whir
spun hex-nut ascending / descending screw’s serpentine threading
coil-sprung
  coupling     diamond cross-hatched for grip
tighten, crank, wind
rhythm of hum
churn & chug
push of steam gauge   (flap & flange)  pressure release: hiss
pipes curve-flow     tubing flushed
lever & fulcrum greased
spew
  brass latch flipped  polished hinge snap
squeal of metal-on-metal
  steel pistons
   (stamp-press-crush)
  cycle — etch — disk — cut
tin rivet-punched
the stink / the soot / the sweat
scrub  hack  wheeze  & spit
Moss and Black Stones

MARIA TEUTSCH

You there in the corner of the forest--
I am the singer of moss and black stones.

Remember when the balcony was where you started?
When thermal updrafts created wings of space

for you to fall upon, feasting and fasting at once?

Don’t you know that regret
is an opera with no audience.

A banquet of one is still a banquet.
Thieves will always dine with you,

glow midnight blue in shadows,

then they’ll honey the gears, and complicate a simple plan
with the machinations of stars in combat.

Your implosion is a darkness hidden, sucking.
Desire is the mesh to snag a fool’s heart,

in a hunter’s chest a pig’s can easily replace its beating.
At Seventeen

BRITTANY CAVALARO

the purity ring I ate in a cake at Christmas –
your beautiful mother serving the housekeeper supper,
my kneesocks puddled around my ankles, the bluff
in Marin & its army bunkers, the seven-minute traffic light,
the reedingote of your palms on my new breasts, your brother
& all the requisite Neruda, hand-holding, silk scarves, leather
gloves, charity dinners in Monterey, your oil baron
uncle & all the drill bits that were never installed
except by those two hands – the San Francisco sushi bar
where I slow-pressed spines into my tongue, your dirty fingers,
my junior prom, your first premiere, the girl we sang to
on the table, the girl you’d fucked inside the playhouse,
monument, waterfall room, the sheepskin, the nights
I’d pray to my own stomach, the nights I’d pray for you
to rot, the single room, endless stream of ten-dollar words, the hangers-
on, the gut-suck & split legs, barbed wire, the thick, tin-sweet blood
that I wrung from my body into the waiting ground.
Understudy

BRITTANY CAVALARO

A ripe pear for the field. You lip its flesh.
   The girl does the same. The same as you
   but all in beige. Holding your pony’s reins

   and the mud of her prints from bringing in
   the dark. She’s brought herself
   from somewhere close. Where does she

arrange her body when the sun bows down?
   What should you do – find the little ones,
   arrange the plate and the plate beside. Instead

   morning arrives and then hurriedly departs.
   Instead he and the children leave and now
   the train and their luggage is carried by suits,

it’s not for your hands. The girl extends hers.
   Her face is yours but not pillow-swollen.
   The pony watches with his eyes, she can’t move

   without him watching. She wants to take your fingers
   away and as she watches they convulse,
   that’s how you know they want to be hers.
Clint always imagined himself working his way up to something, but has been the “new guy” longer than he has been anything else. Working the graveyard shift, he drives a pallet-jack down frozen isles under towering stacks of potatoes, corn, and Salisbury steak at Tri-City Meats in Meridian, Idaho. From behind an orange Jägermeister bandana, his breath billows, escapes the moist cavities of his lungs and then vanishes in the minus 30-degree freezer.

He wears a black wool beanie, a camouflage thermal under three Haines t-shirts under an oversized dark-blue Tri-City Meat jacket, a pair of Wranglers tucked under another pair of Wranglers, and wool socks under Adidas running shoes. White gardening gloves covered in red rubber dots house ten numb fingers with chapped knuckles that sometimes bleed.

The electric pallet-jack is a cumbersome device with a grip-throttle like a motorcycle—a very slow, ugly motorcycle with a wooden pallet resting on two steel forks sticking out the rear. It is a dogsled without dogs, lurching toward prey that has long ago been killed, butchered, over processed, and is now waiting patiently in neat stacks.

The hours between 6 P.M and 2 A.M are spent hunting item numbers and gathering boxes in the manmade tundra, filling work orders, stacking icy boxes of food according to size and shape, shrink-wrapping, and then loading the glossy package in the back of a semi-truck. If Clint forgets to scan down the list for bigger boxes and stacks smaller boxes on the bottom, he will have to reload everything. If he doesn’t plan ahead, it will mean more time in the cold.
While he works in that expanse of frozen racks, Clint sings, and the concrete floors resound with the acoustics of a giant Antarctic bathroom. He has a few tracks on repeat and belts out high notes as if no one is listening—and no one is. *This train is bound to glory / This train.*

Two other men work the graveyard shift. Dave is the night manager, a nice enough guy and under different circumstances there could be barbecues, cold beer, sizzling meat, bullshitting. Tracey works the fridge and walk-in. In a month and a half of working at Tri-City, around six words have tumbled out of Tracey’s bearded mouth. Recently, Tracey has taken up side-swiping Clint’s jack with his own and not saying anything, not even looking at him after he does it. The man looks like he could have been Santa Claus at the mall a very long time ago, before his diagnosis or whatever death of whatever loved one and the subsequent addiction that twisted him and caused him to chew his fingernails past the quick and harass the new guy at work.

Mornings are quiet around their place. They usually wake up around noon and he makes coffee while she smokes, puts her feet up on the coffee table. Beth’s python, Pandora, coils like knotted headphones under a split log in the corner of an otherwise empty glass terrarium.

“How was it?” he says, hoping she will report an unusually slow night, maybe a bomb-threat.

“Ok,” she says, and before she elaborates, Clint imagines what it would sound like if his mug went through the kitchen window. She talks about getting a few private dances. He hears sounds when she talks but cannot listen anymore. Her voice has become distant and obscured like yelling under water.

When they met, her teeth were green and her skin was purple. They were both lit like Christmas trees when he shoved his hands up the front of her shirt at Phil’s party that night. They made out and he walked her home, four miles in the dark. For a while, they dated other people and some time passed. Before long they ran into each other at a party, where Clint followed her into the bathroom.
Later, they drank Pabst at her apartment on State Street, listened to music, and talked about why The Crow was the best movie ever made. Clint thought that Beth was kind of a badass because she had posters of horror movies on her walls, an impressive CD collection, dirty-blonde dreadlocks, a pierced septum, a ball python, and six pairs of black-rimmed glasses with the lenses pushed out. She had tanned skin and green eyes, and her name tattooed in blue ink above her ass. That night, Beth wore the snake around her neck and said she was medusa, said she would turn Clint into stone if he did not bring her another beer. When she wasn’t dancing, Beth dressed like a guy and slouched when she sat, smoked a cigarette before she ate breakfast. She fascinated Clint. And when she walked six blocks to the courthouse for her probation hearing, cursing about community service, Clint walked beside her. In the courtroom, her fake dreadlocks were pulled into a thick ponytail, and her septum ring was in her pocket. Beth had faced a misdemeanor possession of marijuana charge with a possible one-year sentence and $1,000 fine. But because it was her first offense, the judge sentenced her to 100 hours of community service and one year probation.

Now, the black lights shine at the club, and even when she is home, Beth’s skin has an abnormal hue; her expression is rigid, as if she is constantly trying to make a difficult decision. Now, when Clint looks at her, he is reminded of those dreams where you try to scream but cannot make a sound.

He lies on his stomach and watches the dull outline of Pandora as she searches her tank in the dark. After a few minutes, he takes the blue spiral notebook outside to the parking lot and sits on a curb to scratch journal entries under the only lit bulb: he writes food budgets, dates when his bills are due, price quotes for car parts, his remaining EBT balance. Pictures of skulls with spears and arrows shot through them spurt black blood onto the margins.

Clint remembers when it was all frantic sex on the living room floor and smoking weed from a glass bong that Beth named “The Dome Dropper.” He used to like the smell of Nag Champa, and thought it was cute how she
would lay out her outfit for the next day on a red plastic chair shaped like a hand. He remembers seeing her blue Cookie Monster t-shirt under a red bra, draped over two red fingers, a pair of jeans sitting in the plastic chair, each pant leg tucked into a black skate shoe with the laces tied under the tongue. It was as if a person had been sitting in the chair and the Rapture had happened, leaving a pile of clothes gripped in the giant red hand. Clint thought that heaven must be full of naked people. Next to getting ready for work, it was the most preparation he saw Beth put into anything.

Now, he prefers whiskey to weed. Now, the clothes on the chair look out of place. He grinds the tip of his cigarette against the sole of his shoe and goes inside, leaving the lamp to drone over tired cars, the blue and yellow plastic and bleached-white paper of spent-trash sleeping in gutters. Back in bed, Beth is sleeping naked with her left arm over her head, the blankets barely covering her breasts. Clint closes his eyes under a dozen glow-in-the-dark stars while Pandora climbs the wall of her terrarium—tracing the caulked seams, testing the plastic lid.

The next day, Clint drives to the Pet Store listening to music with the left side of his headphones—the only side that works. Sometimes he can bend or twist the cable and get the right side to work. Beth stays home and smokes weed, watches the History channel. On the drive home, the pinky mouse scratches the inside of its small brown box, and Clint turns the music up, and begins twisting the cable of his headphones. Music blares in his left ear, but he can hear scratching the whole way back to the apartment.

Feeding Pandora used to be a much bigger deal, more like a ritual. Clint used to call his buddies over to drink beer and watch him feed Pandora, but after they had seen it four or five times, they lost interest.

Back at the apartment, Clint picks up the mouse by its tail, flips open the plastic lid on Pandora’s tank, and drops the mouse with a perfunctory motion. At first, the mouse runs to a corner and tries to scale the glass. Pandora seems disinterested and remains coiled. As the scent of the anxious mouse fills the tank, Pandora flicks her tongue and begins to unravel. Clint has seen this happen many times, and it’s always the same. Pandora flows like an oil spill to the corner, where the mouse is frozen, both of the animals tasting the air. She folds herself into a bundle of muscled switchbacks, a spring-loaded mouth. And as Pandora orients her head toward her prey, Clint almost intervenes.
He imagines saving the mouse at the last second, swooping in with his hand, as Pandora’s mouth slams shut in slow motion. But he knows that Pandora must eat. The fact that Beth bought a snake means that every ten days something must be sacrificed to something else. The snake is coiled and the mouse is in the corner, and then the snake and the mouse are one animal with two tails. Pandora’s aim is perfect, one mouth around the other, ringing its body with her own, killing the mouse the only way she knows how. When he looks at them, trapped in the glass cage with nothing to do but eat, or be eaten, he feels sorry for both of them. He turns off the bedroom light and walks downstairs in the dark as Pandora unhinges her jaw.

Pulling the rat-tail of a cord that slowly slides open the twenty-five foot freezer door, the same freezer door that now houses a dictionary-sized hole from the right fork of the reach truck, he is amazed that no one else has noticed the damage. Taking short breaks from the cold when his fingers stop working—every fifteen minutes or so—helps the blood return to his face and hands. He stands on a stack of broken pallets, smokes an American Spirit, and blows signals into the sky where maybe another graveyard shifter across town sees his smoke and understands. The tall lights in the parking lot cast an amber tinge, as if he’s looking through a glass of whiskey, making the vinyl of his running shoes look stressed, older than they actually are.

The night before, Clint and Beth sat on the couch watching T.V. Beth took long drags off a Marlboro Red and its tip blinked like the eye of a cartoon monster. A&E featured a show about slavery in America. It was one of those reenactment shows were everyone wears old clothes and overacts. A few white people were pretending to be slave owners or members of The Underground Railroad; the black people wore overalls and thick dresses and pretended to pick cotton. A gritty voice explained that the Underground Railroad had used various songs to signal their presence among slaves. Some songs meant that a conductor was nearby, and that escape might be possible. Without a word, Beth snatched the remote and changed the channel to a show about rich housewives obsessed with plastic surgery. Clint turned his head and looked at her but she did not meet his gaze.
Clint takes another hard look at the list in his hand. “Fucking tater tots,” he sighs. Normally Clint is supposed to get Tracey so he can use the reach jack to pull a pallet down from the top shelf, but Tracey has rammed his pallet-jack twice tonight. Positioning his pallet jack directly under the column with the tots, scanning the lip of the top shelf, the box of tater tots perched some thirty frozen feet up, beginning his ascent, thinking about Beth, about falling from a height. He tries to focus but cannot stop thinking about her getting into some guy’s car—no doubt fast and new with blindingly chrome rims and low-profile tires. They make small talk and then she turns on the CD player—which works—and slides out of her clothes like a snake removing its skin. It becomes impossible to shake the image of her with someone else. A slip of the hand sends a box of frozen chicken crashing to the concrete below with a loud crack. Surprisingly, the chicken does not scatter everywhere as he imagined it would.

He starts singing and thinks about the Seven Dwarves in Snow White and how they “whistled while they worked,” and how Snow was probably having all kinds of sex with all of them, except Dopey. She would not be able to keep a straight face while doing it with Dopey. The stone that the builder refused / Will always be the head cornerstone.

The gardening gloves make a good grip difficult, so he takes them off and stuffs them into his back pocket. The steel racks are cold enough to burn his bare skin and the frozen metal sends needles through his exposed fingertips. Within arms reach of the tater tots an intense pain like a heat lamp pressing on his forearm reminds him that Beth will be home soon. Did he leave a light on for her? You’re a builder baby / Here I am a stone.

The tater tots are heavy, and he readjusts his grip on the rack, using his right hand as an anchor, clawing with the fingers of his left hand, sliding the box closer to the edge.

If it’s dark when she gets home, she will be scared. She does not like the dark, not even when she goes to bed. Her mind will race with thoughts of strange men hiding in the corners of her room.

One final effort and he manages to slide the box off the rack. The box turns slightly through its fall and explodes against the smooth concrete, tater tots slide everywhere like the burst entrails of a tundra beast, stretching out over seamless ice. This train is bound to glory / This train.
Outside the freezer door is an office and a small break room with lockers, a large grey table, and a coffee maker. After tearing open a package of cheap coffee, adding water to the pot, and flipping an orange switch, Clint rubs his pale hands against each other for the frictional warmth, two strangers staving off hypothermia, blows into them while the machine makes a high-pitched sound. Clint wonders if Beth ever gets cold like he does.

Thinking about Beth, wondering what she is doing right now. Her left breast is slightly bigger than her right—she has a small scar on her left forearm from where she burnt it with a sparkler as a kid.

The coffee pot boils over and thick brown foam seeps onto the counter and sloshes down to the white linoleum. He added too much and he quickly tries to clean the mess before Dave or Tracey comes in. On his hands and knees, cleaning up spilt coffee with paper towels at midnight, Clint wonders if any of it can be salvaged.

It’s 2 am, and Clint’s shift is over. He slides his timecard, opens his locker, takes his black leather wallet, CD player, headphones, cell phone, and leaves without saying goodbye. As he walks across the parking lot toward the car, he turns the phone on. The white RX-7 has a primer-grey hood and looks defeated. The previous owner removed all the door locks and the ignition housing. As a result, the car has no key. His phone vibrates, a text sent from Beth at twelve fifteen saying she needs cigarettes. Clint pulls the orange-handled flathead screwdriver from under the driver’s seat and slides it into the slot where a key should go. “Square peg in a round hole,” he says to himself, and starts the car. He pulls out a Thomas Guide from the glove box, and as the engine warms up, Clint thumbs through road maps of the Southwest. He puts his headphones on and presses play. He lights a cigarette and traces each of the four interstates running wild across the width of the U.S., following the progression of I-90, I-80, I-40, and I-10.

The engine is warm. Clint leaves the Thomas Guide open and tosses it to the passenger seat. He drives down Fairview Avenue, past Quick Wok and Krispy Kreme, takes a right on Eagle road toward Interstate 84. At a red light, he grabs the Thomas Guide and finds where he is—the I-84 runs west toward Nampa, and east toward Boise, and beyond that, it splits like a snakes tongue, into other interstates, wrapping east and west through places he has never been.
The Burden

LAUREN HENLEY

So many times I’d hold my finger or my whole hand up to an object and see how close I could get without touching
Such as the man who worked at the health food store and I was just graduating high school
He rode his bike to work he didn’t have a car
He said his muscles were from supplements and yoga and I liked his
    shaggy auburn hair his blue eyes He talked about vitamins
I liked the sounds of amino acids
Lysine Glutamine Carnatine Taurine they could be the names of precious stones

The full moon party was at Gamma Gulch so far from town so far from cops
it was another pocket in the desert’s dress and only certain hands could fit
It was everything he said that it would be Crystal gardens and teepees
couples sneaking off falling away from the drum circle like quarter notes erased from the page
There were peacocks roving over the boulders the males iridescent as oil spills
the females drab as nursing home drapes

And what about me I was dressed like a little present something small but long desired a gold watch face a collectible Matchbox car
I couldn’t do it the way I couldn’t get my ears pierced when I was seven
    both times thinking about the pain and the permanence and the new look that I would have
His face under the full moon said he was disappointed said he was destined to make many mistakes
So many times I'd hold my finger or my whole hand up to an object and see how close I could get without touching. Such as the man who worked at the health food store and I was just graduating high school. He rode his bike to work; he didn't have a car. He said his muscles were from supplements and yoga and I liked his shaggy auburn hair, his blue eyes. He talked about vitamins, I liked the sounds of amino acids—Lysine, Glutamine, Carnitine, Taurine—they could be the names of precious stones.

The full moon party was at Gamma Gulch, so far from town, so far from cops. It was another pocket in the desert’s dress, and only certain hands could fit.

It was everything he said that it would be—Crystal gardens and teepees, couples sneaking off, falling away from the drum circle like quarter notes erased from the page. There were peacocks roving over the boulders, the males iridescent as oil spills, the females drab as nursing home drapes.

And what about me? I was dressed like a little present, something small but long desired—a gold watch face, a collectible Matchbox car. I couldn’t do it, the way I couldn’t get my ears pierced when I was seven, both times thinking about the pain, the permanence, and the new look that I would have.

His face, under the full moon, said he was disappointed, said he was destined to make many mistakes.

I been the leper of your gaze. I been the Adolphe Menjou. Nobody knows what’s talking here. What’s talking. You never liked cows when I was a cow. You never liked licorice stick or red whip when I was a candy.

I been the Republican senate. The guy on the security cam who jumped the stile. Your little bombshell. Bitch went off. Off as in turn the ringer off off. People’s so stinky sometimes. What am I the janitor? Don’t hand me your mop. The handle of which, by the way, looks like it’s been up the chimney flue. I am the creosote. I been the burning bush. And stood among the alien corn. I been the cold I been I been the heat you felt. But now it’s time to go and pack. Ack.
In the 80’s the Civil War in El Salvador drove my mother away. Only eleven, she hadn’t learned how to make the Salvadoran quesadillas. She had seen her grandmother squeeze pieces of dough firmly against the wooden table as gunshots flew through the humid air and struck the windows like messenger birds of death—table legs wobbled and tapped against the cement floor my mother sat on.

30 years later I joined a student group and learned the technique of pupusas. I press the dough against my palm, circling its side with my index finger like molding pottery, and then carving out its insides. On the surface of my skin the mush is left over hardening like salt on your skin after swimming in the ocean. I take the fillings of loroco con queso, chicharron con frijoles then patting them in, closing the ball tightly making sure that none of it will seep out. As I place it on the ashy metal plate, the oil is absorbed by the pores in the pupusa and the bulk hardens. My mother says that in El Salvador she never got to make them.
or else she would have died young.
I roll another circle of dough,
and look at her and tell her I’ll teach you.
On The Siege
a sestina for Jean Le Pautre’s *Plenarium, The Siege*

SARAH BAY WILLIAMS

The image: a prickly offending army on its way to the castle—but beyond; the mountains!
This advance will not go well,
the image by Jean Le Pautre,
whose line—such precise detail of line…
Such certainty and such victory in this siege.

Was this tangled muster of spears in this siege
first in your mind, Le Pautre? Storming the castle
with each carving of line?
And what of the clouds and mountains,
ever a part of this siege, Le Pautre?
Did that part go well?

Clouds and mountains in the distance, surrounded by well-meaning gods and goddesses, roiling siege,
hurling snakes, certain, fearful, jubilant—what, Le Pautre?
What do these gods think of this castle?
Or are these gods hidden in the crags and crevices of those mountains,
reaching up to the clouds of line?

Spears, flames, trumpets, armor divested of soldier, snakes-in-hand, garlands and bounty made of lines.
Le Pautre reaching into the well,
to enter the pages of the Plenarium, with distant mountains.
But I focus on the clouds and mountains; The mountains beyond the siege,
beyond the poor castle,
their silent presence always a soft sweet attack on the horizon—Le Pautre.

Do you see the mountains, Le Pautre?
A tossing of wild lines
thoroughly carved—and a window, through which there is army, spear, mountains, clouds, castle...
This you’ve done well, Le Pautre, well.
You will still this siege
‘til later when this army in your mind looks upon the wreckage of castle—‘til they can see through the rubble to those mountains.

All of the mountains
you will give to the army, Le Pautre.
The castle, prey to the Siege,
even bordered by gods and goddesses of the line.
Somehow—well—
they are busy with their god-duties within that border around the siege.
It’s not the gods’ fight for that castle.

The gods in The Siege neither victims nor mountains.
Le Pautre is destroying the castle...
In lines. Rather well.
The Lightning Travels

BRIAN TURNER

Within the stark white walls of the Renown Hospital, fluorescent lights shine their questions like flashlights as my feet shuffle and stumble, old with the knowledge of what lies behind the long black row of doors. Others shuffle and stumble by me. I know all of these people. I know why they came. I am beginning to recognize my own choices in the light and the dark around me.

As I travel through the bones of the skull, like lightning through a wire connecting rooftop to ground, I discover a place where death does not dare step in, where there is only the distant murmur of unknown people haunting my subconscious, those who wish to touch, perhaps, the way a storm might touch the earth sometimes, like sparks on the water, sizzling.

This much I know. We are not dead. We are not free. The human body is a slave to the soul and the cost of our death is folded within the humorless clouds of a gray world. But still, we are the path down which the lightning travels. To live is to simply let go. This much I know.

A lonely gin bottle sitting on the headboard
labors to inspire the numbing dreams
which—out of love, like musicians
with their instruments laid down—
might serve to keep me company.

The air has turned electric—conducting
all that is about to happen. Through windows
of blue and grey—the air smells of rotten cabbage,
pond scum, rancid sweat fermenting,
stewing, the dark soul of a marriage
overcome by the hive of bees in sheetrock,
layers of winged frenzy sweetened
only by the magnolia tree out back.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned—
not from the wandering,
not from the traveling, and
not how Aristotle said it best—
it’s how I move, most impressively,
alone. No one stretches me.

It’s true. A bottle of gin is only lonely
when it’s empty.

“Tonic” is a collaborative poem written at the Kerouac House (in Orlando, Florida) on
18 July 2009 by: Susan Shannon Spraker, B.J. Hart, Naomi Butterfield, Julie Dunsworth,
Mary Ann de Stefano, J. Northlake, Lorie Parker Matejowsky, Mary Elizabeth McIlvane,
Kenneth S. Murray, Gene Moore, and Bernadette Adams Davis (with Brian Turner as
editor).
### I. IDENTIFYING INFORMATION

<table>
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<th>Patient Name</th>
<th>Last: Gutiérrez</th>
<th>First: Eladio</th>
<th>Middle Initial: M.</th>
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<td>Date of Birth:</td>
<td>2 / 18 / 39</td>
<td>Age: 70</td>
<td>Sex: Male</td>
</tr>
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### IIA. PRINCIPAL DIAGNOSIS:

(The condition established, after study, to be chiefly responsible for occasioning the patient’s admission)

In cases such as these, the patient did not have an aneurysm because he fell; he fell because he had an aneurysm. A retired man who still kept tidy the yards of many just so he could treat his children to the luxury of soft drinks and higher education. Me, in the flurry of a life he never had, am interrupted by the words: *Sister, my tío is dying.* It was then that I was reverted back to a past life of savagery. If only I had not trimmed my nails the night before, I might be able to scratch out this bleating heart of mine, smash it on the ground until the screeches become muffled enough to grant me the illusion of rest. Had I not allowed myself to become domesticated, I might be able to howl at the moon and drown these sorrows with the tears of my Patrón and be rid of its reality by hurling it at the wall. You have to understand, He’s not going to wake up. How do you translate that?

### IIB. INITIAL INDICATIONS:

Nos miraron como si supieramos que “familia inmediata solamente.” Llenamos el cuarto de espera y los pasillos también—Todavía pensando que esto es lo que significaba solamente familia inmediata. En Noviembre 20, 2009, el hombre, que después de su primer trazo, trató de escaparse de la hospital en silla de ruedas, murió. Y aunque ya me conocen como la norteña con Español quebrado, este día mi boca no sabía como se sentía hablar Inglés. Llevame a los cañones. Tráeme limas y coronas para poder estar sola en los cerros con nada mas que el lamento de latón. Quiero lanzar las botellas vacías y quiero oír la rotura de vidrio.*

### IIC. PROCEDURES IMPLEMENTED:

We were told to wait, to keep from disrupting anyone’s Thanksgiving. And on the tenth day he was lowered into the earth to the song of tears and trumpets.
It slams into me like a 5000 pound Hummer. What am I doing, moving to assisted living?

Why am I here? Will I be able to adjust? I’m too young to be so old. I must be nuts. Well, on second thought if I were “all there,” I wouldn’t be “here.”

Sure, there’s some dementia, but living midst all the wheel chairs, scooters, and strangers is like sitting in the bleachers, the cheap seats. The view is tolerable, but comfort takes time.

I call us Orphans because there are no adult children in this community of elders, and many are “dropped” here. When do the children become parents and do a dumpo? Perhaps when they sense the parents have more nuts than bolts? Or, the children want control of the financial legacy they think the parents are squandering?

We are Drop Outs because we had to leave our homes, routines, friends. We live independently, but it is assisted living because we get three meals a day, housekeeping, transportation, entertainment, and activities.

There are those who need hourly help to get dressed, to stand, to bathe—they need more assistance and wind up in the Funny Farm, an acronym for where you go when you lose all memory.

Everyone has a story he or she wants to tell, but so far very few are willing or interested to hear someone else’s tale, except for an occasional query about what disease you have, when did your spouse die, and your blood
pressure medication. The first week of my arrival, I listen to a few stories. Trouble is, I believe them.

I think I luck out and meet a diner like Selma. Selma wears a long, crinkled skirt, hair fly-away, and her bra straps slip away from her low cut blouse. I love her voice. It is throaty and deep. If she tells me she’s a singer I will not be surprised.

She’s into telling a fascinating story about how her family screwed her. I ask, “In what way?”

“You heard me, I said screwed.” She raises her voice.

“Tell me about it. I love incest stories.”

“Well,” she goes on, “You know the most famous analyst of them all in Beverly Hills? His name begins with Gal... he screwed me after he doped me. I won the case.”

“How much?” She turns out to be more interesting than I anticipate.

“I don’t remember. He doped me with sodium Pentothal for weeks. That’s why I don’t remember his name, or yours.”

*I’m wearing my new resident name badge on my sweater. How can she miss that?*

I sit forward. “You have no memory of being doped?”

“No but I wrote a book.”

“Really? What a coincidence. I’m a writer, too. Let’s trade books.”

“I only have one copy left. I can’t let it go.”

At this point, I am intrigued and ready to buy it. I take out a pen and paper from my bag, preparing to write. “What’s the title?”

“I don’t remember,” she says.

“How about exchanging books for a day or two? I’m a rapid reader.”

I’m aware of my interest in her as a potential friend. Someone I could trade more than books with, a friend who I could talk to about anything. I luck out on my first day. I could be happy here. I remind myself not to pre-judge the residents whom I already label inmates. They may turn out better than they look.

“So we’ll trade books?”

She pushes back her chair, gets up, and appears hurried. She looks out the window. “I need to walk my dog three times a day.”

*That*, she remembers.
Virginia, another resident, is a retired Lt. Col. in the Army. She walks with a stick strapped to each hand, like a cross-country skier. “I refuse to use a wheel chair. I hate them, and I would feel like an invalid,” she says in a loud voice. She carries her books, papers, everything she needs for the day in her backpack. I admire her and her mind. She has a snappy, quick way of speaking, as though she is still in command in the Air Force. She always appears happy to see me. I look forward to her visits in the dining room. Sometimes, she talks rapidly and for a long time. That’s when she tells me, “I’m hard of hearing, but I consider you a friend.”

Hard of hearing, and she is not an exception. That’s when I discover I have a weak voice and if I intend to be heard I need to force myself to speak louder. Is it my problem?

I recall Pema Chodron, the Buddhist nun. She advises to beware of Negative Labeling; as you label it, so it appears to you. I’m trying my best to be open and meet a potential new friend.

Several elderly women residents I sit with during lunch are making plans to travel in the near future. I speak to Jennifer, a stern looking ninety-ish woman with turned down lips. “I’m getting a ride to the airport,” she says. “Where are you going?”

“Oh, I’m not sure, but I know that I’m going to travel.”

“When you know, I’d be interested in hearing about it.”

“I just told you,” she says.

Then Joanie interrupts, “I’m traveling, too. I don’t know where, but I know I’m going to the airport, and then I’ll decide where I want to go.”

I wonder if I’m missing something. I’m also aware they are not asking me about my travels or offering any explanation. “I’ve never gone to the airport without knowing where I’m traveling,” I say.

“Well,” Joanie blurts, “it has something to do with security.”

“Oh, you’re afraid of carrying on the wrong items?”

“Not exactly,” Jennifer says. “We want to be patted down.”

I hold onto my chair for this one. I learn a lesson, sexuality knows no age limits. It comes in handy when I remember these are “Hot Grannies.” When I think of ninety and look at the glamour on these women, they are ageless. Several of them have permanent eye liner. When I tell Sylvia, “You have beautiful eyes,” she confides, “Parkinson’s Disease runs in my family and when I was in my sixties I went to a tattooist in case my hands shake when I get old.” Vanity knows no limits. I am learning to set aside my usual judgments.
I believe that each face is a map of your life. I see each wrinkle as a road and every brown spot a locale with a story. And nothing wrong with a line where there's been a laugh.

Sally, another comely, slender ninety year old whispers: “I bumped into a very nice Swedish man in the thrift store.”

“How do you know he was Swedish?” I ask.

“Well, after he apologized for bumping me, he told me how attractive I am, and asked, “Are you Swedish, too? All the time we spoke I felt heat travel through my arm where he held his hot hand.”

“Did he grope you?”

“Heavens, no. We just met.”

“When are you going back?”

“Yesterday.” She smiles with anticipation.

I bet I’m the only person in this residence who reads “Rolling Stone,” my favorite subscription. I feel contemporary when I read about current music, mostly Rock and Jazz. Also, I’m one of few women whose hair is naturally salt and pepper—more pepper than salt. Living here is an experience out of space, into the future, minus fangs and walking on Uranus. Bifurcation comes to mind: divided into two or more pieces. When I’m back into usual life with old friends and activities, I feel alive and significant. When I’m back at the wrench, I am as old as everyone else with memory loss and balance issues. How to unite the two?

I try to listen and speak to new faces, always with a smile. This is a wonderfully friendly community. I tell myself not to let it become a substitute for family. It is what it is. The last stop before the last stop.

“That’s a terrible thought,” Roz, a dear friend and former neighbor, tells me over lunch at her favorite McDonald’s.

“It’s reality. I feel I’m dealing with it.”

“You’re dealing with depression, go see a shrink.”

“Don’t you ever think of yourself as old, Roz?”

“Of course not, I’m only seventy-eight. I plan on living in my home forever.”

“So did I, but at 83, I want to be free of cooking, shopping for food, housekeeping decisions, all of it.”

“I hope I never tire of shopping and cooking. I’m still a good cook,” she says.
“Wait a few years. That may all change.” Did I stop cooking too soon? Did I move too soon? A trace of envy runs through me.

There’s a full stocked bar in the lounge, leading to the dining room. Everyone looks happy. I figure it’s because they each have a cocktail or wine glass in their hand. I guess my mistake is giving up drinking.

I try to listen and speak to new faces. Thing is, I am naive and tend to believe what I hear. At lunch, starting at eleven-thirty in the morning, I arrive at my time: one ish. I see Matt bent in the shape of a paper clip, pushing a walker with the seat piled in layers with chicken and mixed salad and a side of herring from the buffet. “This is for my wife,” he says, reaching for the tray of peanut butter bars.

“Doesn’t she ever come to the dining room to help herself?”
“No, she stays on the brown leather La-Z-Boy, or in bed.”
“Oh, what’s wrong with her?”
“She likes to be served.”
“Do you mind?”
“I just do it. She wants it that way.”
“How long are you married?” “Twenty four years.”
“And she has always been like this? How old is she?”
“I found out by accident she is 15 years older than I am.”
“You mean all these years you didn’t know that important fact?”
“I received a document in the mail that had her correct age on it.”
“Unbelievable,” I said.
Matt releases the brake on his walker. ‘I’ll see you later, need to bring this to my wife.”

I find this all unbelievable—like so many stories I hear—so I ask Sonia, the first woman who greets me when I arrive at this senior living residence. She has a solid mind and still looks perky, and dresses with flair and care. I trust her. She confides that Oreos and peanut butter packets are never on the buffet but I can ask for them. I consider that confidential and trustworthy.

I ask, “What’s wrong with Matt and his wife?”
“Oh, you mean his difficult plight and how she hates him?”
“Yes!”
Sonia laughs, “There is no wife upstairs.”
“Ohhhhhhh.”
This is a Geriatric Theme Park: Even if you aren’t hungry, eat three times a day—you’re paying for it. I bring a large plastic bag to dinner to fill it with breakfast cereal, fruit, and whatever else fits into it. A part of me dislikes the “grab-what-you-can-while-it’s-here attitude.” Another part tells me, it’s not a resort or a restaurant, it’s based on money. That’s why it never feels as though the scanty portions and everything covered with cheese is desirable, just affordable to the stockholders.

I am always saying goodbye. It depresses me because sometimes I don’t get to say it. I depend on the same faces to reappear, to smile, and to say hello. I should get used to it, but I’m always surprised.

Happiness for me? If all the people I loved and lost would live forever. Like dust rolling along a road, saying goodbye is bringing back all my losses.

Where was I when I was growing old at the speed of light? Maybe I’ll believe in Karma. Perhaps that new galaxy, found to be a billion years old will house us all; our bones may turn into treasures—as long as I don’t turn into a relic.
No Kiss For You

LAUREN HENLEY

He did not know he was my only friend
that night he drove the twenty miles
through nowhere-desert
to get me home by curfew

When we stood under Lander’s moon
in front of my step-father’s magnum chain-link gate
my sparkling cleavage
the grease slicking his orange hair
the dust lit by his pick-up’s low-beams—
did he realize

that he wasn’t getting laid not even kissed
and more importantly that life was not fair

You can be a total gentleman
hold the dead leg
of a girl all night pay for dinner pay for gas
and still she’ll put a finger to your lips and say

No kiss for you

I could go on

Still I like to imagine
my heart is a physical place I know something about
but have never been to
Poem For July 2009

LAUREN HENLEY

For 750 a month I am queen of the unfinished studio above
Lucky Jack’s Garage
while all the friends I don’t have live in condos downtown
It is July inside and it is July outside
We know because we feel like birthday checks
filled out with pencil and dropped in a swimming pool

I pick up Jonathan at midnight from Shin’s Sushi Bar
where he’s been waiting tables dressed in all black
like a spy or a ninja or midnight
He smells like someone who works in a sushi bar in July

The rotting narrow stairs on the side of Lucky Jack’s are in total darkness
I climb onto Jonathan’s back if my bad knee buckles
My cheek presses into the fish of his neck
my arms around the fish of his chest

One thinks of stealing water even though you have water
of breaking into city pools of raindrops the size of hazelnuts

At two am after sex the July moon turns on the town lights firecrackers
up and down the street and makes a sound like laughter trapped inside gelatin

There are still divorce papers to finish and more court visits and my ex is
still calling and angry and I want to say stupid
Jonathan lives with his older sister and her husband and also Kyle who
lives under the stairs and by November
they will not like me
At 3 am I whisper sweet things  
open polar sea  
meat locker  
Siberia  
ice castle

4 am and there is no more borrowed Ambien so we talk movies
Cool Hand Luke cutting heads off parking meters
his reason being it was a small town  
not much to do in the evenin’
Was it an ax or a crowbar that he wielded
when the street was not laughing—
Modern Living

LAUREN HENLEY

Your body floats up
from the twin-sized bed
to the popcorn ceiling of serpentine asbestos
& your face as soft as a mollusk
pink with pearls of sweat on the brow like a crown
presses into the ceiling where you have to breathe
cannot help but breathe until
you twist your neck
like the handle of a wind-up dog to see
your bed has someone in it
someone who loves to sleep
who is sleeping now
who looks like you but older
who is tired from arguing with his lover
tired from removing the outdated ceiling
all that scraping

scraping while a dog barks down the hall
at every passing car
& a baby cries & a woman cries

Somewhere in the house is a television
It has always been on
You & the television were born at the same time
Both of you were slapped on the side
to make sure you that you worked
Now you can crab-walk the ceiling out the open bedroom door down the hall to a den that darkens then becomes light as the clouds cover the sun break up or thin

There are rocking chairs that empty & fill but the adults are always talking clanging pots & breaking glasses newspapers rustle & rustle grey & black & folding sometimes burning on the stove & quickly taken out Still they rustle the smoking papers shouting about stocks

It’s nearly morning the den darkens Everywhere a dog barking & the sound of a wooden rollercoaster building up speed building up & then slamming on the brakes
Thank You Ferlinghetti

A.N. TEIBE

I am awake at 3am
watching Deadwood
& thinking how handsome
Seth Bullock is & what a nice job
they’ve done on his mustache & triangle
goatee & his eyes strike me
as intent, like he means it when
he looks at you.
I am who I am who is
continent-based, Canada to Mexico
but mostly in between &
I’ve worn cowboy boots &
shot skeet & admired the thin
bones of cowboys & ridden
their horses, letting them do
all the work.
I do laundry on weekends, four loads:
the whites, the pinks/oranges/reds,
the blues/greens, & the blacks.
I hang my shirts & panties to dry
so respectively they keep their length & stretch.
As a child I didn’t have enough socks
or tape or scissors.
My friend taught me how to ride a bike
in the first grade. Then I got a red
one-speed with a black banana seat &
I rode it to the North Forties, to the park,
to the Groceteria which now
is Beaver Ski Resort’s office.
I have skidded the corners of Isla Mujeres on the back of a scooter, the driver some guy I’ve known for a week. I’ve eaten arroz con leche & pozole & bad spaghetti & stood on the rooftop of 50 Santiago off the Xola metro stop among power lines watching neighborhood fireworks and fiesta. I let papers stack & books lie. I rarely make potato salad.
Just one week ago, I had been pretty. Not outrageously good looking, but pretty. I had smooth, clean-shaven skin and clear, ingenuous eyes...fortuitously average features that worked together to form one of those amiable, trustable, unexceptionally attractive faces. A few grayish hairs at my temples, sure, of course, that’s a given. I looked sort of like your typical, seasoned Starbucks’s barista who you secretly hope is pursuing a graduate degree when he’s not making swirly hearts in the foam of your latte. And that was enough for me.

Having not only lost my pretty face, but my comfortable life as a professional loafer in Los Angeles, my only choice was to come here...to this gloriously dank diner in Gallup, New Mexico and sit at this dismal counter on this rusted, torture device of a barstool. And this diner, this sweaty armpit, this shrine to lard, can’t have any other name than the one it has—Stink’s. How wonderful. How perfectly unimaginative. It’s just right. Everything is as it should be...the swelling sty on my right eyelid...the razor burn on my neck...the ancient Bunn-O-Matic coffee machine...the neon yellow sign flashing the word STINK over and over...the purple-yellow bruise on my left cheekbone....

“Good morning and how...are....” The tremulous voice of a bewildered teenage waitress rises and goes nowhere. Her smile, if she had one at all, quickly turns into something else. She stares at me, I think, or at the counter between us.
“How about some…?” she trails off, looking only at the notepad in her hand. Before I can answer she turns away to pour me a cup of coffee and then edges it across the counter as if feeding a lion. The stuff smells like chemical fertilizer.

I tell her thanks and she smiles briefly, flashing silver braces over large, jutting teeth. I tell her I’m waiting for someone and try to think of something nice to say, some compliment. She lingers with her pad, nostrils flaring, glancing, perhaps, at my pulpy shiner. The looping embroidery on her checkered shirt says Darla. I love it.

From what I can make out, Sweet Darla’s equine features remind me of my first and only girlfriend, Lucy Caldwell. Our brief and awkward romance was highly publicized and heavily documented by both of my parents, who still keep a photo of her on the family mantel. On the last day of 8th grade I made Lucy cry when I handed her a heart-shaped note that said: You’ve been a great friend.

When I don’t say anything else to Darla, she clomps away to busy herself with something and I’m left alone with my anxiety and my hot mug of tar.

Madam L—my interviewer, my reason for driving fourteen hours to the great state of New Mexico, the woman of the hour—should be here any minute. I hardly know what to expect; we spoke briefly on the phone exactly once over the last few days. The tone of her voice was sultry, whiskey-slick as a blues singer, and somehow made me feel all the more guilty and depressed.

Five minutes to nine —still time left to wallow.

When I told Benito about Madam L’s ad in the LA Times, he said I should go for it. He wanted me out of the apartment so he could think about us without me moping around in my underwear. We sat on the balcony of our one bedroom apartment, sharing half of a joint and drinking coffee, not sure which mental and physical direction we wanted to go in.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Benito sipped his coffee. A few fingers of sunshine reached through the afternoon haze.

“The worst? Hum. Maybe she’s not even a she.”
“Hmmm….” He passed me the joint. “Her voice on the machine... seems like she is a woman. You should put some more ice on your face. It looks so bad.”

“I think she’s insane,” I said. Our Siamese cat, Frank Bidart, smelled the weed and came from the open sliding glass door to rub on our legs. “And I don’t care how I look right now. If you aren’t my partner, then what do I care how the fuck I look.”

He waited a long time to respond. Every part of me hurt.

The night before, at my 35th birthday party, I had sold my soul at The Abbey in West Hollywood, and not to the devil but to some young, preppy prick with a practiced right hook named Douglas. We made out on a pillow-top bench, he sucked on my neck, I pulled away, said I’d made a mistake, and voila!—punched. And all before the clock struck ten pm. Benito wasn’t at the party, he was with his sick father, but I came home and told him my story.

“You’re still my partner,” he finally said. “I just want you out of the house for a while. Maybe you go and learn some things. Get some work.” He took the joint back and put his coffee down next to his bare feet. “Read me the ad again.”

I’d been keeping it in my pocket like a worry stone, pulling it out and unfolding it every ten minutes, seeing if anything had changed, if any red letters popped out saying “Don’t do it!” or “Definitely do it!”

“Okay. Here goes. Wanted: Ghostwriter for biography. High-profile public figure. Payment equals dollar sign, dollar sign, dollar sign. And then her email address.” I passed the joint back and he breathed deeply. His eyes were almost closed.

“Totally sounds like bullshit.”

“I thought you said I should go for it?”

“Fly, little birdie,” he said. “Fly.”
Through the brownish, smudgy windows of Stink’s, I see a few young transients stringing their guitars on the curb. A boy of about twelve comes up the sidewalk, seemingly from nowhere, with cherry lips and a drunken walk. No, not drunken—handicapped. He sees the guys on the curb with their guitars and begins to strum wildly on his own invisible guitar, singing.

A light hand touches my shoulder. “Pete, you got here right on time.” I jump a little and my barstool squeaks.

“Let’s take this party to the patio,” she says. “I’ve got my doggy with me. Darla? Will you send out some griddlecakes, please?”

Wordless, I leave my cup on the counter and follow her out. And holy shit, there’s a bear of a German Sheppard sitting unleashed under the shade of a table. She pats the bear’s head.

Madam L looks about my mother’s age, sixty or so, except much more fit and more stylishly dressed in her white Audrey Hepburnish petticoat, hip-hugging jeans, and leather slingback stilettos. Multi-strand liquid silver earrings and a few shiny, dark brown curls dangle from a black beret. Her body’s tight curves tell of decades of high-impact aerobics and thousands spent on facial peels and breast maintenance.

Now settled at the table, we both pull out a pad of paper and a pen from our respective satchels.

She smiles. Her teeth are lovely, straight. “You like pen and paper too, huh?”

“Yes,” I say. “I think it’s more personal.”

“Do you normally take notes when you’re being interviewed?” “It’s the writer in me.”

She scribbles on her pad of paper. The Sheppard snores at her feet. “That’s Killer there. He’s very tired today.”

“Of course,” I say.

“So. Shall we begin?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say. “Shoot.”

“What’s up with the sunburn? You want to get skin cancer someday?”

“No, I just—“

“Well, I hope it works out for you. I had a cousin die of it. Anyways. Okay.” She realigns her posture and brings her shoulders back. “You like griddlecakes, right? I just assumed.” I nod. Then she says evenly, as if it is a normal question, “So why don’t you start by telling me,” she searches my face and settles on my sty, “the most horrible thing you’ve ever done.”
Now, I had gone over the usual interview questions in my head during the whole drive from LA to Gallup. I’d planned to tell her about my publications, how my essays and stories were all over the Internet, and a full-length book of short stories was surely on the way. I was prepared to say that my biggest weakness was being a perfectionist, that my biggest strength was also being a perfectionist, that I wanted to work for her because I respect women, and that whatever her story was, it was important. I was not prepared, however, to be interrogated.

“You’ll have to tell me the most horrible thing you’ve ever done if you want to write my story, Pete. But if you aren’t quite ready, you have until the end of the day. Let’s try something easier, okay?”

A familiar sense of defeat tickles the back of my neck as she stares at me.

“Have you ever been forced to do something completely against your morals? Have you ever been used? Violated?”

“Used, yes. Violated…maybe.”

“Have you ever been in a relationship with a high profile politician, devoted your every waking hour to him or her, only to be dropped like garbage at the dump? Have you ever faked your own death?”

“Umm, I…let me think.” I stumble.

Under the table, Killer is having a doggie-dream and scratches my ankle with his claws.

“I didn’t think you’d say yes to any of those questions, Pete. And that’s okay. I don’t need you to have lived my life; I just need you to be empathetic to it. Would you say you are empathetic, Pete?”

“I would say that, yes.”

“I’ve read your short stories, Pete. The one in *Sparkle Magazine* and the other that made it to *The New Yorker*. Very nice work. Both of your stories were beautifully written.”

I thank her humbly, brow still furrowed.

“You wrote about beautiful things,” she continues. “But I am not an old man saying goodbye to his children as the sun goes down and I am not a soldier with PTSD finding solace on a sailboat.”

Actually, it was a houseboat. How closely had she read my stories?

“No,” she says, “I am not one of those characters that people love to read about. I am not a character that makes you feel warm inside. I am an ex adult film star. I’ve been raped and beaten. I’ve done every kind of drug and
I was an alcoholic for nearly twenty years.” She pauses and looks at me with those dark eyes, leans in closer. “And that is just the beginning, Pete. That is the tip of the tip of an iceberg the size of New Mexico. Do you think you can handle all this, Pete?”

“Do you mean…that you’re offering me the job?”

“Hell no. I just want to know if you can handle it.”

I shift my weight back into my seat and fold my hands on the table. The handicapped boy across the street is looking over at us.

“I can handle it,” I hear myself say.

“Then tell me. What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done? I can’t go into details with you about my dark past unless you share some of your muck with me.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“What did you do to Benito?”

“Excuse me?”

“You must have done something.”

“I’m sorry. I’m confused. How do you—?”

“Well, I assume he’s your boyfriend or husband or whatever.” Just then a large greasy man with a filthy apron sets down our large greasy plates on the table and not too gracefully. He didn’t like what he heard but he didn’t say anything either.

“Don’t worry, Buck’s harmless. He’s probably gay too. Most homophobes are. Guess that makes most the fellas in Gallup queer.” She cackles. “Wow, this looks good.” Madam L places a paper napkin in her lap and starts to cut her griddlecakes into small bites. She pours syrup on a piece and hands it down to Killer. “You look stressed,” she says.

“I can’t hang out in Gallup all day. I have a life that I need to….I’ve got to know now if I have this…this…and what you’re going to pay me.”

“Mmmhmmm,” she says with a petite bite of griddlecake in her mouth. “We’ll get there, we will. So,” she takes a sip of water, “you must be really hooked on this guy, huh?”

“Madam L, I—“

“You know how I know? Your answering machine message says: You’ve reached Benito and Pete. If you want to leave a message for the handsome and talented artist Benito, yadda, yadda, yadda—you know what it says.” She sighs heavily. “I just thought that was really sweet.”
“But why do you assume I did something to him?”
“Well, I left a message yesterday morning, hoping to catch you before you left. Wanted to tell you that I’d pay for your room at the Motel 6. And he called me back.”
“What did you…I mean…did you talk?”
“Well, sure we talked. We were on the phone. Be weird not to talk, right? He was very kind. Love the accent—is it Spanish or Portuguese? We talked for nearly forty-five minutes. Good talker,” she said. Then with a sigh, “Good listener.”
“And?”
“He told me everything.” She straightens her shoulders again and takes her time with a big drink of water. “Shame about his father. When I called the first time and left my message, he was on his way to see him. You picked a hell of a time to break his heart.”
Knife into chest. Twisting. Who does she think she is?
Then, a loud rumble somewhere off in the distance. Maybe it’s thunder. Maybe the sky will crack open and wash us both away.
“Well,” she says. “I see I’ve rendered you speechless. Come for dinner, Pete.” Madam L stands, tugs at the dog’s leash, sees that I’m still sitting and about to cry over my uneaten breakfast. “Oh come on, Pete. I’m sure your soul is still white as cream. You should see mine sometime. Then you tell me if you still feel guilty.” She puts a twenty on the table even though our check hasn’t come yet. “My ride is here.” She pulls a card from her dainty leather wallet: John “Two Black Eyes” Lube and Tire. 1704 Dusty Rd. “Just come around back to the house, the dogs won’t bother you. Around five-thirty, okay?”
There is singing over the thunderous rumble. A sun-bleached truck with a spider-cracked windshield pulls up to the sidewalk. At the wheel is a long-haired man singing “Crossroads” as if nobody else is around.
“Come on now, Jake!” Madam L shouts across the road. The boy comes from his perch on the curb, air guitar in his arms. John Two Black Eyes leans across the passenger seat and opens the door for the boy. The boy hands his invisible guitar to John before climbing up. When the boy is buckled into the middle seat, John gives it back to him and they begin singing together. Madam L helps Killer into the truck bed and without a final wave, the truck goes rumbling down Coal Avenue away from Stink’s.
She could have at least told me the boy was with her. She could have told me any number of goddamn things.
At the open chain link gate, I am greeted by Killer and his slightly bigger cohort, a Rottweiler with a bad case of conjunctivitis. The dogs follow me or I follow them towards an adobe style house set about a hundred yards back from the gate. Dust-covered birdbaths and swing sets and children’s shoes look like they fell from the sky years ago and no one cared. A kiddy pool of dusty cutlery sits beside an empty, hobbled wheelbarrow like a Russian avant-garde installation. Terminal-looking trucks huddle around a pieced-together garage, its asymmetric cragginess seemingly undeterred by the laws of physics, the blackness of its rectangular mouth cut by the gleam of massive hooks and chains hanging down from hidden rafters.

Through the open front door of the house, oregano and garlic and pureed tomato waft. The impulse to do an about-face is no match for my long-held aversion to missing out on a free meal.

“Are you the guest?”

I spin around. A boy of about ten years old and 150 pounds is cradling to his dark, bare girlish chest a fat, orange tabby.

“That’s me,” I say, readjusting the leather bag on my hip, “The guest.”

“Did your face get messed up from an accident?”

“No,” I say. “Well, kind of. A few accidents I guess. Someone punched me and umm…then I shaved with a dull razor, which was dumb of me. Then I went to the beach and got sand in my eye, which is how I got…this sty here.”

The boy nods shyly, unsure of how to possibly respond to my adult blithering. After gently putting the cat on the ground, he opens the door and I follow him inside the mudroom, which has floor to ceiling wooden shelves and cubbies. He steps out of his dirt-caked rubber Crocks, places them in a lower cubby, then hurries into the living room saying, “Hey, you guys, he’s here.”

Rabbit and fox pelts hang on the walls and drape over chairs in juxtaposition to Ikea floor lamps and bamboo rugs. A large flat-screen TV is partly covered by a tie-dyed tapestry. The whole living area smells of leather and herbs.
“You are the writer.” The sonorous voice of John Two Black Eyes sends tingles up through my feet. Before I can even fully see him, he’s hugging me tightly, his arms so long they could wrap around me twice.

“Yes, that’s me,” I say. “The writer.”

John stands with straight posture, holding my forearms with his large hands. Awkwardly, I try and do the same. “The writer,” he says, “You must live a dangerous life.”

“Writers do have to be careful out there.”

“Yes, I’ve heard that before. Let’s get some ice for your,” his eyes roam my face, “everything.”

He takes me to the kitchen where pots are bubbling away on the stove and procures a bag of ice wrapped in terrycloth for my face.

“I’m a mechanic but I write too,” he says casually, pulling his long salt and pepper hair back into a ponytail. “I have a screenplay that I want you to read. But of course Susan’s work comes first. Write her story first.” He pauses and then adds, “If you get the job of course.”

Oh, right…the big IF. At least now I know Madam L’s first name. The mysterious Madam L is none other than Susan, lover of John Two Black Eyes, writer slash mechanic. Whatever Susan’s story is, I hope I brought enough paper for it.

Susan comes into the kitchen. She’s wearing a low-cut, blue silk peasant blouse and an apron around her waist that reads: World’s Best Mom.

“There she is,” says John, beaming. “Do you like the apron? I made it myself with iron-on letters. It’s true you know, she is the best mom.” John bends and kisses Susan’s forehead. She looks about five feet tall without her boots.

Susan lovingly pats my back. “You’re early, Pete. That’s a good sign.”

“It’s a good sign,” repeats John, smiling at me. I deliver a bottle of sparkling cider from my leather bag.


“Oh, sweetie,” says Susan, “you’re talking to a recovering alcoholic and a Zuni Indian—we don’t drink a drop.” John pats me on the back with a heavy hand. A caldron on the stove boils and releases steam, occasionally burping up filmy water over the sides. Somewhere, a loud clock ticks.

“Hey,” says John, “Let’s drink that cider before the kids get to it. They’re sweet enough—it’s the rest of who need some sugar.”
I’m grateful for John’s hand on my back. Susan excuses herself, probably to go write something on her pad of paper in the other room.

“It’s okay about the Johnnie Walker, you’re just twenty years too late with it. Sometimes timing is perfect; sometimes it’s off by twenty years. But timing,” he says, “is everything.”

I stare at my shoes. He uncorks the cider and pours it into three glasses.

We sit on a big, overstuffed polyester couch crowded with rabbit and fox pelts. We sip our cider from wine flutes. I wait for him to speak.

“So what happened, man? I heard you got beat up.”

“Oh,” I say. “No. I mean, kind of.”

“I understand kind of. Kind of like you’ve been falling down a long set of stairs.”

“Right. Yeah.” A dull pain is growing at my temples. “That’s pretty spot on.”

“Kind of like you’ve been doing stupid shit for as long as you can remember.”

“You got it, man.”

“And every time you do something stupid you think it’s the last time.”

“Amen, brother.”

“But now you’re really done doing stupid shit—right?” His voice is humorless as a judge. All of my muscles, large and small, sphincters included, tighten.

“Sure as shit,” I squeak.

“Right, good.” He seems to be assured by this, and a wily smile spreads on his handsome face. He raises his glass to me. “Here’s to cutting the crap.”

“Cutting the crap,” I echo, missing his first toast by a full inch.

“You can’t see worth shit, huh?” he says.

“Blind as a turd,” I say.

“Well, I’d like to see how the other guy came out.”

“Blind as two turds,” I mumble. He laughs. It almost feels like we’re actually drinking.

“If you get the job,” says John earnestly, “I want you to mention how tall I am. Mention that I got a growth spurt when I was thirty-seven, grew two more whole inches. Now I’m six foot five. Most people don’t believe me if I tell them. If you put it in your book, people will know it’s true.”
“I don’t know if that’s exactly—”

“And I know we just met, but I’m telling you that I’m a good man, a good partner to Susan. Not like those other men who did what they did to her.” His face contorts. His hands curl into fists. “I’d kill those men if they weren’t already dead. “ John turns to me, looks me in the eyes. “You can write that in the book, okay? I want the world to know. Sometimes I get so fucking mad that they are dead, those fucking evil men. I wish they would be alive for just a day. I would tie them up and bring them to my garage. I can’t tell you how many hours I’ve spent thinking about what I would do to them. It’s sick, I know. But you don’t know what they’ve done. If you get this job, you’ll find out.” John’s hands uncurl and his face calms. He takes a swig of the bubbly cider and swishes it around his mouth before swallowing. “It’s good to have a man to talk to.”

“Yeah.”

“You ever seen the movie Reservoir Dogs?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Well it’s kinda like that. I mean, what I would do to those guys.”

Dinner is not easy. The food is good and I have to admit, so is the company. I don’t want to like them—that’s the problem. I want to be suspicious and bitter for my time being taken up by something that isn’t going to give me money or an interview with The Atlantic Monthly. But I’m enthralled with the way this strange family of misfits interacts with such love and understanding. Jake eats his food very fast and Susan has to keep reminding him to slow down. She does this by rubbing slow circles on his back. Twice John tries to get Jake to chew with his mouth closed, but then he just throws up his hands and says, “We have to pick our battles.” The other boy, the big one, is affectionately called Big Bone.

After dinner, John makes a fire in the outdoor fire-pit. There are three makeshift benches made from sanded logs. We all sit with our hands wrapped around mugs of tea, staring into the flames. There is talk of movies, TV shows, concerts, and large gaps of time where no one says anything and I can hear the howling of coyotes, dogs, and the unnamable. Suddenly it’s ten o’clock and I wonder if Susan and I will ever get to the rest of our interview. Finally, John takes the boys inside to get them ready for bed, and I am left with Susan.

“So,” she says, “I have a pretty nice family, huh?”
I nod in agreement, feeling all at once the past three days of intermittent sleep....Ah, Benito, how I miss you and your sleep-talking and mouth-breathing and elevated body temperature. How I miss our pillow-top mattress and the way little Frankie Bidart curls up at our feet while we sleep. Why am I here? Why?

Silently, we watch the fire as if it is likely to do something unreal. The night is still and serene and the stars...I haven’t seen them in years. This is nice. No, it’s not. I need to get home. Home to what? Fuck all. This fresh air is making me crazy.

“I have to ask you, Susan—what’s with the name Madam L? I mean, why didn’t you just say your name was Susan?”

“Madam L is what they called me in Washington,” she says.

Go on, I’m thinking. But she doesn’t.

“So you were a politician?”

“No,” she says. “But just as low as one.”

“Low?”

“Like a snake,” she says, not missing a beat.

“You’ve got to give me more to go on here, Susan. You can’t expect me to forage around while you leave a trail of breadcrumbs. You’ve got to open up or I can’t write your story.”

“Okay,” she says. “Walk with me.”

Under the wide-faced moon, we traverse the large, fenced property, side by side, stepping over spoons and forks. She bends to pick up the forks as we go along.

“I told Jake no forks, only spoons, but he doesn’t want to listen.”

“He plants them or something?”

“He’s not delusional,” she says. “He’s not planting anything. He’s decorating. But he’s gonna be in trouble with these forks. These could hurt somebody.” She pauses. “Jake is adopted, I don’t know if you knew that. Big Bone is from John’s previous marriage. I knew I couldn’t have any biological kids. I wanted Jake because,” she sighs, “because I wanted someone like me. Somebody just a little messed up....Oh, God, here’s a bad one.” She plucks from the dirt a line of five forks, prong up.

We are both quiet again. Her face looks different in the moonlight and seems to change depending which direction we go. Somehow, she looks like
someone I’ve met before. But just for a moment. We go out the back gate and into the desert.

“Who are you, Susan? I mean, if you’re ready to tell me where you’re from, what your childhood was like, what jobs you had. I’d really like to know.”

“Facts don’t make up a person, Pete.” She points at a patch of moonlight on a sage bush. “You see that patch, Pete? That patch is my mother. And the bush? That’s my daddy. This rusted can over here,” she pauses then kicks it, “that’s my childhood. That shack over there with no door? That’s my better judgment. I’m all over the place, Pete. Scattered. I’ll never have all the pieces, understand?”

I want to understand. I really do.

“What about Washington?”

“Washington is this pile of dirty forks I’m carrying. I’d like to just leave them out here but that would be littering.” She chuckles softly.

We sit down on a bench similar to the ones around the fire pit.

“John put this here,” she says. “For nights just like this one.” She sets the forks down by her feet. She latches onto my left hand and holds it.

“It’s a good bench.”

“Pete,” she says, “have you seen the porn film called Deep Throat?”

I choke on my saliva and have to pull my hand away to cover my mouth.

“Uhhh,” I say. Of course I had, every teenager from the 80’s had seen that movie.

“I’m Linda,” she says. Coyotes howl now, crickets chirp. My heart speeds, drums in my ears. “I’m Linda Lovelace, the star of Deep Throat—and other films.”

“Susan.” It’s all I can say. My head is shaking back and forth.

“Just give me two minutes to explain,” she says calmly.

“Yes, explain it to me Susan! I drove 650 miles to get here so please do explain how you can be a dead porn star and a New Mexico house wife.”

“Don’t yell, “ she says. “John will be worried if you yell. He has good ears.”

The scene from Reservoir Dogs where the man has his ear cut off while tied to a chair floods my mind.

“My name is Susan Boreman and I was born in the Bronx. My daddy was a hard-ass policeman and my mother was a hard-ass housewife, both
Catholics.”
“You know I don’t have my pad and pen on me, right?”
“Well, you got ears and a brain. You got a heart too, I assume.”
“Okay, Susan, but I have to—”
“This is just the barebones of it, Pete. We’ll do details later. The big part is that you know I was Linda Lovelace and Susan Boreman. Linda Lovelace died in April of 2002. Her car rolled twice, she’d lost control. The car went up in flames and she was gone and nobody cared. And I mean nobody.”
“So you faked it then?”
“I’ve faked many things in my life,” she says. “Mostly orgasms.” She cackles and I’m glad for the release of pressure. I laugh a little too, just to hear the sound of it.
“It wasn’t my choice. It was Ronnie’s.”
“Who is Ronnie?” I ask, afraid of the answer.
“Ronald Reagan, 40th president of the United States and 33rd governor of California: actor, politician, and my lover for nearly a decade.”
“Susan, how am I supposed to believe all this?”
“You wanted the facts, didn’t you? Well, these are the facts. Beggars can’t be choosers. And I can’t write my own story because I’m dead, understand? Everybody thinks I’m dead. But the dead have a life of their own. My dead life is better than my living one ever was.”
“You walk around and people don’t recognize you? Can’t they see you’re Linda Lovelace?”
“Nobody cared a rat’s ass about Linda. Sure, they saw her in the movies and they got all excited. They’d read about me in the tabloids, how I was beat up and tortured by my husband, how I was left penniless and destitute. But they didn’t see me. Take me out of a nurse uniform and put me in a dress suit, I’m like a ghost.”
“I feel like a ghost in Los Angeles,” I say, instantly regretting my sentimentality. “But this isn’t about me.”
“Yes it is, Pete. It is about you. You feel like a ghost? I know you do. Then from one ghost to another, I just need you to believe me. Know that I am real, okay?”
“Why did Reagan want you to die?”
“So we could both have peace. We’d both done so many bad, bad things. He wasn’t the first president to have a mistress—but a retired porn star? That
was something.”

“Why Reagan? I mean he was a real asshole. And he was so old.”

“We got each other,” she sighs. “He was an asshole but he was *my* asshole.”

Our laughter fills the expanse around us, bounces off shacks and fences. But I have to stop abruptly. My head is pounding.

“We both felt guilty about Nancy. I mean, she had her own affairs too but I never got used to being the other woman. He treated me halfway decent. Took me to fancy hotels in Japan and Switzerland. We got high once at a Café in Amsterdam. He was so much fun that day.” She runs her fingers through her hair and her eyes are wet. “But he never let me forget that Nancy was his queen. She had him wrapped around her little finger. He never loved me, not even after nine years of romance. If he bought me a rabbit fur coat, he bought her a mink one. If he took me to a four-star hotel one weekend, he took her to a five star the next. He talked about her all the time.”

“And then he just decided you should die in a fiery car crash?”

“It was staged, there was a stunt woman driving the car. The government can make anything look real,” she says. “I was in Germany when it happened. He had given me 100,000 dollars and a plane ticket back to the U.S. for August of that same year. Three months, that was all it would take for America to forget about Linda Lovelace. The deal was that I would never contact him or the press. Besides, who would believe that I was the resurrected porn star ex-lover of America’s hero?”

“Not *my* hero,” I say bitterly.

“No, not mine either. I’m a liberal. I’m for gay marriage and pro-choice. I’m for the underdog. I was on a Christ Crusade for awhile there but I’ve come to my senses since I was born again.”

Everything feels so backwards. I keep looking up at the moon to feel like something is constant, but even the moon’s craters seem to darken and change places.

“Reagan liked that I was a reformed porn star. That I was once dirty and sinful but I had seen the error of my ways. We talked about foreign policy a lot. And movies, he loved movies. But we never watched Deep Throat together. He said seeing it once was enough.”

Spinning. My head. Is spinning.

“I need to…sleep on all this, Susan.”
“You can try,” she says playfully. “You’ve been a good sport, Pete. I mean, you’re still here so that is a good sign.” Good sign. There’s that phrase again.

We make our way back to the gate. I stop before we enter the yard.

“What’s the point of this story? I mean, what do you want people to know about you? What’s your message?”

“No message. Just the story. From my birth to my death to my birth and all that. People will get the message that they need to get.”

“We’ll have to publish this as fiction you know.”

“I don’t care. What’s real? What’s not real? I don’t know either. Time will tell.”

“Why aren’t you angrier? I’ve had a pretty decent life and I’m angry. Pissed off. And I have hate, real hate, for Ronald Regan.”

“Ronnie helped me start over. He’s the one who suggested New Mexico, said he’d done movies there, that it was all open spaces. He said if I lived near a reservation, I’d find people who’d been cast out and swindled like I had been. Survivors. I found John and Big Bone right after his wife died. He was drinking and Big Bone was still an infant. They were helpless. Ronnie had saved me; I saved John. Me and John and Big Bone and Jake—we save each other every day.” She laughs and squeezes my hand. “That’s a good line. Remember it for the book.”

We come to the back door. Moths flutter against the yellow porch light.

“Susan, I don’t know the answer to the question you asked me earlier. You asked what’s the most horrible thing I’ve ever done. I don’t know. I feel like maybe I haven’t done it yet.”

“That’s a fair answer.”

“But maybe the worst thing I’ve done is waste my time. I’ve just been… coasting.”

“Mmhmm. I hear you.”

“I haven’t done anything brave. I haven’t taken any risks. I take shit for granted all the time. I’m lazy. I only write what I think people want to read.”

“And?”

“And I basically live off of Benito’s success. I barely do anything to help out. I’m a fucking leech.”

“Let it all out.”

“So I kissed some dweeb. That’s not really the issue. Benito knows and
I know that the real problem is that I, Pete Peterson, am a coward. I’m a fucking spoiled, unproductive, amorphous…fucking…pile of…and when we go out I never pay for dinner.”

“Never?”
“Never.”
“Well, leave all that shit out here, damn’t. Start over. Bury it. Burn it! Kill it in a car wreck.”
My head is going to explode in pain and I’ve broken into a cold sweat.
“I have the job, right?”
“Yes,” she says. “I think it’s safe to say you do.”
“But I don’t know if I can fully believe all this, Susan.”
“You don’t have to. You write fiction don’t you? I would assume that writing fiction involves believing what you write to a certain extent doesn’t it? I mean, you half believe it and you half don’t. That’s all I need from you. Believe me enough to write it, okay?”
I tell her okay, stumble into the house, and collapse onto the pelt-ridden sofa. I want to tell her that I just need a minute…just a minute and then I’ll go. But my eyes are closing and soft blankets are being layered on top of me. My shoes are being pulled off. How nice. In another life, she could have been my mother. No…that’s not true. What is true? Am I true? Oh, Pete. Stupid Pete. You didn’t ask…you didn’t ask…how much she’s paying you….Oh, that’s perfect. Too good.

Something is licking me. Where am I? Oh, yeah. Here—at Linda’s. No, Susan’s. But in my dream state I was walking through the desert and stepped on something freshly dead. Some little animal, half-eaten.
I pull my feet away from Killer, wipe them with the blanket. He looks disappointed. I get up slowly, quietly, trying to keep Killer from barking and waking up the whole family. I shouldn’t leave without saying goodbye but I want out. I want my apartment, I want my partner, my cat, my life.
In the bathroom, I look into the mirror. Such a sad looking man. Before I can see Benito, I need to let my face heal, touch up some grey hairs, and
go to the gym for at least a year.

In the hallway I pump out seventeen flimsy push-ups then collect myself from the floor and run a pocket-comb through my hair. There is no time to waste. Susan is in the kitchen, wearing a terrycloth robe, a cup of steaming coffee in her hand.

“I had a feeling you were an early riser like me,” she says. “How do you take your coffee? We have goat’s milk and raw sugar.”

“Sounds fine,” I say. “I think I’m going to take off here soon.”

“I figured,” she says, looking me up and down. “You’re gonna wanna take the details with you then.”

The details? I follow her into the kitchen. She takes a small key from a hook inside the pantry and disappears down the hall. She comes back with a bulging manila envelope; on the outside is written “The Details.” She hands it to me with a smirk on her face.

“It’s all there. All the details of my life. I’m going to need you to call me every day though Pete. You need to hear me tell the stories with my own voice. I need you to come back in a few weeks too. I want you to see me when I tell the stories.” Her arms are crossed. She’s serious about this arrangement.

“You know that technology is very advanced these days, Susan. We can talk over our computers and see each other’s faces. I’m getting a new cell phone tomorrow and I’ll have plenty of long distance minutes.”

Susan sips her coffee and leans against the counter. “No, Pete, that won’t do.” She pulls a small envelope from her robe pocket and hands it to me. “It’s for your travel back to Gallup next month. As far as payment, I’ll be splitting half of all book revenues with you. I can’t give you anything now; I simply don’t have it. Big Bone needs braces.” She says this as if it would explain it all, like I would nod my head in understanding. Yes, of course, Big Bone needs straight teeth. Of course I’ll write your insane story, pro bono, that no one will buy. Let’s see, half of nothing is…nothing. Big fat nothing. Maybe I’ll step on a fork on the way to my car and then I can sue her.

“Susan…why me? I mean, you’ve given other people interviews right?”

“No, I didn’t give anyone else the chance to interview. Just you.”

“But other people contacted you about the posting right?”

“Pete, you’re the one I choose. I choose you. You’re perfect for the job.”

I’m perfect for the job because I’m the only one willing. Am I willing? She smiles at me. Well, shit.

LAUREN HENLEY
BADLANDS

I sip my coffee and goat’s milk, leaning against the counter of her warm kitchen, the soft fabric of her robe brushing my skin. I usually drink soy but this isn’t too bad as long as I don’t think about goat teats. Which of course is the only thing I can think of. That and the fact that I’m a first class, grade A sucker.

She walks me to the front porch. The sky is peach and blue. The forks and spoons in the kiddy pool look like glass.

“It’s all in the details, okay? Read the details and call me. I’ll see you in four weeks. We’ll make you a good dinner.” She hugs me and makes slow circles on my back. She smells as warm and sugary as a donut shop.

I break the hug first and walk towards the chain link gate where my car is parked on the other side.

“Oh and Pete?” she calls after me, “remember to write in third person. Because Linda Lovelace is dead.”

“Yes,” I say, “I know.”

My car smells like a car. It’s cold as a vault. My little objects and bits of trash and CD’s are littered about. I thought this would feel better than it does.

Susan waves to me when the engine starts up, and again when I’m back on Dusty Road and can barely see her. The Details ride next to me, buckled into the passenger seat, as I make my way on the dirt roads back to the highways. It’s a long drive, the longest one I’ve done. There’s plenty of time to think, to practice naming things. The rock pile is my father. The bent stop sign is my determination. The creosote and sagebrush…Oh, I’m not so good at this yet. But I do think I could die and come back, die and come back. Keep trying until I get it right.
He looks for her from the water’s edge.

She rows down a green river,
wears a purple dress and turquoise leaves.

In the bow,
a basket of strawberries
and warm bread wrapped
in a towel embroidered with poinsettias.

Yellow poppies spill over.

As her foot leaves the boat—

The red ribbon in her hair
flies in the air like a cardinal.

but before it reaches the shore—

she closes her eyes
and jumps.
He is mostly machine. He sleep deep guttural jitterbug howling. He is mostly math and metal sheen. Mean beatbox bandit off the south of France. He’s somewhere between the sentence and the line,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a— to you} \\
\text{lying— or} \\
\text{b— under} \\
\text{your} \\
\text{bed} \\
\text{waiting. He’s a brick of something worth more than} \\
\text{cocaine waiting to be found by the police. To be booked, questioned, paged.}
\end{align*}
\]

He’s

CHAPTER TWO

in a good tome gone bad, gone going gone with the windless apocalypse—survivor-types ripping rotted planks away in search of cans that are still good, full of fake snakes and words, perhaps. He’s selling peanuts at the game up in the stanzas calling out, but he moves around to avoid forming lines. Death sentence for Hemingway carried out shouting, “Hey, call me

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a— Ishmael} \\
\text{(and/or)} \\
\text{b— soon,} \\
\text{let’s stay in touch, yeah?} \\
\text{Because I’m not sure} \\
\text{what constitutes the form} \\
\text{ality of form. Can tin senses} \\
\text{approximate themselves into} \\
\text{graphed pairs of squares? can} \\
\text{the Constitution tell me how} \\
\text{many toes the president must} \\
\text{have? When wit marries wit} \\
\text{what goes without?}
\end{align*}
\]
He was sleeping on my sofa in a book of quotes when I got home.

“Have you ever been in love?” I mumbled to him, but it was too much and he fell away, too inquisitive to live in a world of answers, in a world of foam and form. He is inherit unto himself not unlike bento boxes carved from soap and stood upon by the hungry fumblers, having no sense of plot and too much time.
I Beg Those Who Live To See

ANDRÉ V. KATKOV

“All I have produced before the age of seventy is not worth taking into account. At seventy-three I have learned a little about the real structure of nature, of animals, plants, trees, birds, fishes and insects. In consequence when I am eighty, I shall have made still more progress. At ninety I shall penetrate the mystery of things; at one hundred I shall certainly have reached a marvelous stage; and when I am a hundred and ten, everything I do, be it a dot or a line, will be alive. I beg those who live as long as I to see if I do not keep my word. Written at the age of seventy five by me, once Hokusai, today Gwakyo Rojin, the old man mad about drawing.”

~ Attributed to Hokusai

I can’t sleep some nights because Hokusai perches himself above my clock and crows, “I can cut the waves. I can cut the waves.” I ignore him, but he seeps into my dreams and draws them out before I can rightly slumber.

When I head out to school I want to leave him behind. I want to leave him behind but I’m afraid he’ll wither up and die, so I tuck him in my peacoat and hurry off to school. As I hop into my car he sings, “I can cut the waves, I can cut the trees, the mountains, the people, and the birds, the birds.”

I can almost see the world in frames.

When he sings I can almost see the world in frames. I can see the condor’s wings spreading, frills touched by curved white lines showing shape and motion. I can see how things bend and twist and curl. I can see the waves.

And I can’t sleep because he’s there above my clock keeping time. “Twenty-five is so young,” he says. “When I was twenty-five I could see how grass grew. How it danced blade by blade; how the motions differed foot by foot, field by field.” And I can’t sleep because he’s there keeping time and I’m only twenty-two. “I can cut the waves, I can cut the trees.”

I can see them in the trees.
As I drive, there are figures. Farmers in the trees. Bearded and worn in architecture I’ve never known myself. I can almost sense their knotted veins and need to rest. The way their spines twist from years of plowing. I can feel their ache in my back as I lie in bed and try to sleep, listening to Hokusai crow,

“I have known the people and the sea.”
Mushrooms on a Golfcourse at Night

DR. OSLICE

Smell of wet grass rose like steam
Man-made waterfall trickled in ear
I walked a cement path, aimless as
stars fell overhead, cut loose
from strings of empyrean

A row of palm trees wiggle their hips in the spotlight
rhythm in silence, they dance, put on a show for one
I laugh with their performance and clap lovingly just
for one more encore

A short sycamore has been following me, I can hear it.
I turn to walk away but he pulls his legs out of the soil
and tiptoes along the heels of roots, silently cackling
when I whirl back, to catch him

A brazen oak stands tall between two beams of light
leaves flicker as they twist in the night roaming wind
like a thousand shiny fishing lures, strung up in air
its own topiarius trolling rig

An old white fir spreads out his arms and bends over
for an embrace. His bones crack and jerk as he reaches
out to me, and when I squeeze his waist, rough skin
pokes and scratches my face

An ancient maple beckons with ten foot long fingers
dry matted leaves barely grasp, burl withering torso
I lean to hear, century old secrets, the whispers so
no one else, my ear in close
My hands became sticky with their sap brown, thick, more potent than dinosaur bones. I planned to dry it when the sun rose and sell it on ebay
It came like a whimsical breeze riding the breaking swell of surf, waves yo-yoing in uncertainty, yet perfectly willing to accommodate the hunger of the steadfast surfer: tides of strings on a dated, hissing vinyl billowing through the statuesque like a morning glory deluge of first light, bombastic brass, the earmarks of an orchestra tuning just prior to performing – the most intoxicating, anticipatory groundswell of music. It was positively what possibility sounded like – or should, anyway. Dusk had summoned itself unusually late, daylight’s dependence on forty winks giving way, and by way of an open window, a brief rustle of maritime zephyr combed back the maestro’s ashen, serpentine strands towards boyhood’s groomed spring – an accent of youth, soon receding into hushed repose. A ritual ensued, not unlike keeping the Sabbath, and his eyelids gradually unfastened and soon sight sought every studded star that laced up the shuteye sky, evening having collapsed upon the setting sun. He pinched the eyelids narrow into a myopic squint, the habitual welling of tears making vague those strewn, spangled wonders. The sole acoustics in the room belonged to chimes sounding the repetition of hourly passing, pin drops croaking at ease. The sum of the matter was that he was locked-in, a syndrome literal in totality, suppressed in the dominion of what seemed an exoskeletal shell that gave him the familiar feeling – without the slightest feel – of a dried raisin in the sun, which he couldn’t quite place.
A stroke had seized all his capacities save for the movement of eyes some years ago – just how many was no longer apparent to memory, utterly beside the point.

In the months that followed, he grew intimate with what remained, acquiescence of sight green with resignation, lulled dull, mute as deadwood. It was more worthwhile in this static state to savor the eyeful of treasures passed over in indifferent seasons, all having expired beneath the luster of the sun: that which had so often set on the many supporting players that had stepped too deep into his limited limelight decades ago. These departures brought chills endured only by notes, musical and promiscuous, which had flown in the zenith of pleasure, now but a motley of memories. His world-leery eyes, much like wearied eggshells, reminisced these things, vying for remembrances of miscellanea by way of acting as spinnerets, weaving diving bell webs upon the deadpan ceiling that transposed every nook and cranny into reels of film, imagination loosed from its lion’s den: frescos set in motion. It wasn’t impossible to become snarled up in such fantasies, but he was grounded in authenticity. Myriads of thoughts occupied him: his orchestra, those that had played for him, every committed error, even the chattering masses and their impromptu hacks – nimble days of conducting with the physics of a baton and fatigue shone with rapt amusement, the impresarios listening in on his whiskey baritone throughout movements crooning in cracked falsettos as if gargling in gutters – bravado of the inner-child. The aftermath of gooseflesh spoke for itself.

As he drifted off, memory, language of pasts, consumed him whole: it was in the waning hours of summer’s end when he had caught second wind of love’s labor found, a rain check in the form of an unsuspecting stranger drawn like a winning lottery ticket.

In a gallery he had once stood, layered in necessary warmth, transfixed by a replica of a Degas painting, from which all conversation seemed to derive. This had preceded any voluntary motion, and certainly well before an apparitional shadow with the slightest slant of shape lent it an unsavory semblance. It’d take nerve to amend such unwarranted audacity – better to suffer the sight of a sinner than die of curiosity, his mentor always said.
Disapproval came with the most obvious of senses put to use: a fleeting glance from the doglegged pockets of his eyes, keen as an art critic, embracing her comely presence – the shape of metaphors to come – abridging possibility into parenthesis so as to keep her mortal, singular, neutralized – how unfortunate it resembled the rest of one’s life setting sail, all in a single suspended breath.

To the contemporary eye, she was modish, wore suburban beauty without eyeliner, endowed with butterscotch eyes too soon faded on gray mornings that perhaps held grudges against nostalgia. There was – initially – not the slightest hint of the grotesque to be found, the slopes of her bare shoulders landscapes unto themselves, amusing collar bones like stout brows fixed in ceaseless surprise. To passersby, the face held an artless complexion, but there were exceptions, eyes easily persuaded, as she reduced him nearsighted, his words abbreviated to ellipses, fascination a run-on sentence on an empty stomach. Situated in idealism, she seemed to possess the effortless ability to pose any profile, posturing grief, abandon, desire, or all three at once in triptych form, carried through faulty nerves, gossamer seams fluent-faint in sway as a swan aquiver like the strings of a harp, detaching in ripples. It was quite evident she had been a dancer at one time, danced for the better of life’s meridian, every spun step having rhapsodized on parenthetical loves. Exterior-wise, the expected, oddities and otherwise: side-swept waves of a cinnamon hue draped ornamentally, height not far removed – if considering the advantage of tippy toes – from nearing six feet, a quiet, quaint Dalmatian complexion complimented by displaced freckles like breadcrumbs easily mistaken for birthmarks, a barely-there scar on the neck that perhaps once weighed the odds of cancer, an affinity for floral dresses and taking unusual delight in all-things sea foam emerald, possibly the brief notion of spring awakening upon Hebridean pastures – familial, one could imagine – but ultimately, a languid, boyish frame, sporting still the statement of erstwhile fame with ballet flats: the tale of a late twenty-something hourglass suddenly capsized for better or worse – to be determined.

Once upon a salad day she had held marriage as just another pas de deux to dance – held with certainty, but she had held better. Her walk of life had been no more than a leap of faith, ironic considering her lack of faith,
and though she remained an incessantly wet watercolor, uncertain in all trivialities, stability carried her along its aching crutches; and yet, there existed one striking omission that had somehow waltzed by him: she was quite certainly paraplegic, still life from the waist down – a wunderkind reduced to a footnote. It was a fact only inaugurated between them on an askew day that had begun on a straight note.

At this point, four days are of importance, each a movement of a particular rendition, three of which are pasts unto themselves.

I. Though interpretations vary, it can be verified that they took but a season to tie the knot – loosely. It was true that their affection remained immovable half of the day – the other half being tone-deaf by way of separation – but they had, after all, met at high noon on a silent day, aloof wanderers in search of meaning, while summer gave way to fall. Contrary to this, however, was the fact that maestro had long felt a sum. Over time, he had multiplied in years, but age always divided back a generation or two simply through the universal language of music. His looks preserved a handsome, pastoral demeanor with an exaggerated morning air of pine needles, ever on the verge of arson. Granted, the face had its stoic marks, fair share of contradictions, cheeks slightly swelled inward, nose craned similar to that of an inquisitor, meditating eyes more akin to bouquets than daggers, both tinged with a luke-warm lime, squeezed well-nigh dry on many an operatic occasion, his height more a thesis than essay, neck tense in amplification, and gravitational hands as devout in practice as a saint – or sinner. He kindled broad smiles on the dime, and scowls all the more, quick-witted with a raspy, soured voice impossible to imitate, his interior quite Siberian, conclusions superficial, and presence staggering save for periods of brief disarmament.

There were rehearsals that began to feel like pauses stretched infinite, so he began to bring her along, though she felt a solitary star juxtaposed with his constellation of players, progressive at large, the balance of genders a welcome surprise, even in modern times. The perspiration of such inexhaustible hours made like a stifling monsoon. It was here that she bore witness to his doling out of cigarettes to those he approved of as sons and daughters – typically concerto soloists and the string section, woodwinds left for dead – and
quickly learned to make like a coma when it came time for Mahler – a sacrilegious act to be certain, though this is highly debatable. Most commonly, succeeding his out-of-body experiences were deferred sighs with medicinal gulps swallowing back hordes of tears – phlegm to the skeptics – finally lifting his head, wearing what-a-pity expressions intended for the marble-hearted at forthcoming engagements. Soon the formal routine fell out of favor, and they took to carrying on in an apartment not far from the music hall, a complex made up of fallen socialites, newly-divorced salesmen, born-again atheists, and politicians, particularly in the wee hours of philandering knavery. The time spent largely consisted of dissecting strangers of the streets with amusing figures of speech and occasional kisses like toffees – love sufficed.

On weekends, they rendezvoused to the neighboring pier and dissolved the days in reflections, speculating on future prospects. All he could offer were winks of assurance – questionable due to allergy season in bloom – to invest life in her. Time was costly but he was willing to interpret her as she was: a foreign country or reliable after-hour café, her company an intermezzo between rehearsals and performances, perhaps much more, if only he thought so. Her words had been pocket-sized tidbits up to this point, but substance had trickled in, loud as belfry bells, insistent knocking: “This is all beginning to feel like a parody.” The wounds were obvious but not irreparable as the warm tone indicated. “I admire you too much to make a joke out of us,” he quibbled with chewing-gum indifference. If by “admired,” he meant will to live – see: lower limbs – she was prepared to consider alternatives. “No offense intended, darling.” She could’ve purred, the humor so wry. Other exchanges came to pass, including one of great surprise.

Sunset had crept upon them when he laid his head upon her thighs, cushiony without reservations, her idle toes like stationary bait in the roseate water soon to be muddied with dusk. It wasn’t yet dark enough for the local barflies to stagger out bug-eyed under the curious guise of informants-in-hiding: she carefully considered her options, chameleonic under an increasingly drab sky, weighing the odds, obscene yet practical, low budget costs, eyes grooving in directionless orbit, eventually dropping in free-fall like abacus beads upon her subject: prey on a platter, pleasingly plump like roasted pig – the whole ocean, diamantine aquamarine, a blueprint before her.
Then she arrived at a telltale verdict: “Yes is my answer.” A proposal had been unexpectedly accepted – the waters would remain hopelessly breathless, without sin cast.

They had settled by the following season – domesticated somewhere along the coast, another apartment, suitable for three – the honeymoon having eclipsed its own phases with lingering doubts – they had emerged with only as much hope as one that ends without love having been made over its course. It initially seemed a matter of avoiding a stalemate or becoming like neighbors. Chaos had to be arranged with two creators. Somewhere in his wits lay an infant thought thinking this too similar to lynching a dream – it took but a nanosecond for the political incorrectness to set him straight. It was, however, to their advantage that this had transpired on the initial day of urban life spreading its wings. It takes several anniversaries to forward us to the first fracture.

In between years, much had experienced a change of heart. The notion of chasing one’s dreams had slipped into a drought, perhaps even made its exit, left in the permanent address of yesterday. A certain dependency on audacity became essential to make it by. Days had begun to expire without laughter, segueing into one another like a tone poem with too much on its mind. He no longer felt every performance an act of human necessity – the Ninth be damned – and appeared to suffer from existential hangovers. After an evening of Viennese waltzes – he had begun serving audiences pure cold water rather than the manufactured cocktails of grandiloquent romanticism – feeling too long held in derision by another artificial audience, he took his leave by foot, arriving home immigrant-faced, his pace in the key of indifference, all with an air of stale coffee – held in rhythm, he was a ghost note.

That evening, he was surprised to find the first deformity of her figure in their tenure of marriage. He discovered her mum, mood indigo, taken aback by something, a gangling silhouette devouring her own shadow. He himself came forth an abyssal ocean-floor sapphire, unable to make her out. It all seemed a real slow drag. But this was his wife, for heaven’s sake – a fragile thing of beauty with depths yet to be explored, though he couldn’t swim. His sluggish approach brought him into shallower waters. As he took her with one
hand and caught an intermittent drizzle in the other – such tears he knew could be no fault of his – he thought the timing of it all odd. “Why, are you disturbed? This isn’t like you at all, dear.” Before he could transition to another arbitrary query, she took leave of the room, wheeling down halls congested with flulike night towards the kitchen, leaving behind an antibiotic scent.

Here, a candle remained in tact, perhaps for no more than a minute or so before a breeze would blow through the open window and put it out – enough time for a mistake to be shed in its wake were one to be made. As she stood motionless in its gleam – her cheeks aglow with a childish pout mistaken for blush – as if perched atop the pin of a needle, he gravitated towards her, father-to-child-like, eyes in pursuit of game. It started in a mild-tempered hush: “You must resent me.” This had come from her mouth, the words brewed like warm water, the whisper only half-audible. From a certain view, they both seemed cornered into a catch-22, though he had staggered into it, sober with underlying sorrow – two people caught in the hollow chamber of a sound hole, all air motionless.

Perhaps this was true, his thoughts surmised, but too soon fell into a stupor to concede anything of the sort. In short, he thought only of desire, and the inquisition promptly drew to a close so far as he was concerned. His heart seized him mad, watching the candlelight caress waxen skin he had yet to stroke or put lips to for reasons he hadn’t the patience to understand – slanted lunar light had approximate accuracy upon her lolling frame. He proceeded, lifting her featherweight figure atop the table, but she kept still, unmoved by his warped figure inexpertly adjusting upon her – it hadn’t the slightest hint of painstakingly setting a dinner table for guests. No longer were such urges like loose change shuffling about in mindless possibility. “I’m having you,” he murmured, more to himself than the object of affection. She balked in lecture: “You’ll have me, but what then? What tomorrow? What of it all?” It struck a dissonant chord within – still he thought only of flesh, not numbers. Besides, he could make her whole on this night, though he kept his hands oddly tucked in his pockets, floundering about, a quarterback post-fumble. At that instant, one floor up, a runaway pariah, aged twenty, closeted in sexuality, fell upon thin air, an immediate page-ten story for the morning paper and then some – the third suicide in a month. It is otherwise insignificant to the events of our
floor save for the fact that the percussive thud of the drop – subtle as offstage brass, suggestive of distance – struck him with a tenor C, the feeling of which was like a cigarette being put out in his ears.

At once, his hands emerged, searching through sea-tangled hair for words; then came an apologetic sigh denoting sincerity – that too-often missed beat – withdrawing from his stupor of flesh. Eyeing her lower half – that of “no offense intended” – he asked, softly, “How did this come about?” The source of the snag had been diagnosed. An elongated pause, dial tones, grated his patience. “Why ask now? It was just a matter of burning the midnight oil. That’s what they all told me. A real burnout on stage.” It made enough sense. Absurd it must seem for a voyager to fast from flight, mobile in one wing, lame in the other – may as well be beached; but he now understood there was still motion to her yet, tongue-lashings aside.

“Let me give you a good life.” He disarmed, while she slithered arms around his notably slumped figure – a show of tender affection: were it a dance of lovers, it had been choreographed to perfection. Meanwhile, above, the dial tones dragged on, all-nighter improvised jazz, until half-past-six the next morning.

II. As months passed, so too did detachment. Fragments of truth began spilling out, but what exactly was said is one’s guess as good as another’s, the exchanges being held behind both closed and ajar doors, each a confessional, until the day of the final summit, when matters had to be suspended and there emerged the bulge of a third party in waiting – suddenly, the notion of wholeness seemed plausible. She could now rise and clumsily dodder like an infant, taking first steps every succeeding day, though her lean legs remained insufficient for an effectively stimulating crossing. None but the pair cared – the outside world was as expressionless as fashion week runways. He had returned to lightweight Mozart, appropriate for the joys of family on the horizon, but the excess had driven him to agitation, obsessing over thoughts – not of Wolfgang, who he happily left alone.
He feared the arrival would come cradled in mockery, deliverance of a V-shaped rainbow. It wouldn’t make a home, but a renovation nonetheless. Fragments couldn’t do: he refused to surrender to an unfinished work – she couldn’t be of the same breed as Schubert’s Eighth or Bruckner’s Ninth. Likewise, the ordeal seemed a passage through salt mines. The imminent entrant seemed almost unnecessary at this point; yet so much depended on such a little creature. How they would dovetail while he lapsed into her every smile tickled past the limits of brooding adults; in her eyes could be kaleidoscopic pupils, which would likely take after her mother’s, infiltrating where his mind was, where it had been, and where it had yet to go.

Speaking of which, his wife had wised up since the evening of mutual understanding, audacious as a racketeer during Prohibition it seemed – in other words, she had gone plural. Perhaps she had seen the infamous women of past interest in the back of his mind – or hidden in the mind’s eye. She hung above his conscience, a nimbus ballerina, prepared to pirouette en point in revolutions of thirty-two upon his spine and grindingly file it as if it were sandpaper to be scorched to a crisp were he to falter. For a while, he thought nothing of it – the transactions of conductors with ladies of considerate attributes was quite holy – since only he could remind himself of their every expression as they aged, their complexions becoming dappled with musical staffs across the temporal ridge like stress marks holding notations comprising a score of cheap thrills withholding crescendoes for the sake of prearranged sequels. What encompassed all else was the score made flesh: their ever-adjusting time signatures, the tempos of which he never could master – ironic it was that they had but met for the occasion of Wagnerian opera. This was precisely why he had to see them just once more – a farewell waltz if he thought so himself, folie à deux, convinced the darkest feelings held sway over these dances of the past – and bleed them into a single choir of his own liking.

As fate would have it, however, an odd thing happened on the way to culmination – he awoke, the abrupt endings evidence of steadfast loyalty – there were missing hours, as with most men, but these were solely devoted to music. In the end, these theories had rendered him ignorant, and time had elapsed past birth by the time he had returned to physical existence. Like a missed cue, there had been complications – a premature welcoming – and it
quickly became apparent the scene would resolve itself at home in under twenty-eight days: it was a girl.

The fall of night brought almost planetary motion within the bedchamber, the ebbing glint of kerosene lamplight, situated like round table mock suns, ricocheting to and fro, dyeing all monochrome matter: terra cotta keys, vermilion panes, tangerine silhouettes; yet here lay a tiny miracle who could only manage but brief breaths. Her eyes were in transit, all but a famine, elsewhere, subconscious traveling with realtors from the other world, and drowsy as she was, she remained a matchstick. For a while, a quartet – friends of the family – played, probably a late work by Beethoven or someone with an S – he hadn’t the memory to remember, as deafness seemed contagious. He turned to regard his wife, capsized once more, who, just forty-eight hours prior to labor, had waltzed with him, a triptych of bliss – wholeness quickly ushered in, quicker exhaled. He wondered whether the dousing of the little matchstick’s flame would pass through him with another tenor C – if it had, it must have done so in falsetto, for she had exited still as a fleeting flash of lightning, strings at rest, upstaging the cliché of lingering death with a half-smile left in tact.

It had brought him to his feet, too quickly rising, the ensuing phosphenes blinding him into submission to loss – it is a cruel universe that imprisons man in its fly screen.

III. As the longevity of their years wore on, the song of husband and wife subsided into a diminuendo, an ebbing creak of a rocking chair nearing permanent still, parting of waves. One night, he found her exhausted, eyeing him like an apparitional ghost, not dissimilar from their first encounter, reconstructed still life as she was. He met her eyes: “We’ve burned the midnight oil.” It held the resonance of a loosed knot, the tug of anticipated separation, if not divorce, nothing to bind them any longer. Years of rehearsal had come to a last-minute cancellation – a premiere left in the dark. The usual interior dialogue commenced: were she to go, it would be to see all rooms with a different color, the faint groans of the wooden floors would sound discordant, absence inconsistent with presence, tomorrows incompatible with life – one could not wake to yesterdays, nor to a lone cello in place of a polyphonic chorus sound-
ing the absurdity of daybreak. “Goddamn it all to hell.” It was nobody’s fault, though loss often leads to seeking refuge in the arms of strangers, shores of shelter for the beached.

One succeeding year pulled him back into bottomless depths: maestro himself was not yet confined to yesterdays – he had conducted during the latest wartime and earned a modest income of curtain calls, but was now beset by uninvited reality. “Chapter 11 bankruptcy” had the connotations of a requiem for his second home – the way of departures for orchestras in the twenty-first century. It was to be a withdrawal of life’s work in the form of Beethoven’s Fifth. As he walked upon the rostrum, he felt annexed, and from this borrowed body, his funereal complexion receded like a facelift – it was as if standing at the edge of familiarity. No longer was his ensemble of players set ablaze: consider an atmosphere hibernal, void of insight, hands frostbitten, enclosed by pity. Imagine: twenty-nine bars of C major chords each tolling in the key of minor – that’s how certain exits go.

IV. It was ten to midnight when he came to, roused out of comatose slumber by the eavesdropping of an owl’s hoot, once more realizing his surroundings. Here, caught in the tides of heaven’s undertow, an island of adagios, pallbearers before him like celli erect in recline, and he, conducting with the eyes, softly lifting the brows, again the language of music: “Slowly play, my friends, pianissimo, play open.”

Soon some esteemed sculptor would arrive to prepare his death mask, a gesture of nonsense on stilts. Were one to wade through taking down last words, he had prepared a few in thought: “Let me be edited down with grace, without pity in the slightest. Pity only the music. The stranded notes – all without having flown. All men must be seen as the spitting image of a foregone conclusion, markings of their own era’s end. I savored the bouquet of loves that rendered me young.” The eyes queerly gleamed as if in pupil-bloom, assuming his rites of passage with an assuring eyeful of soliloquy. He appeared to hope to be a myth properly negated into bodily flesh as with all lesser mortals, of which he was one. It was all accompanied by the connotations of clarity: the misnomers of his former flame had caught up, and he understood the lady had been an orchestra in mutiny and played open. Somewhere down the line, she
had been interpreted falsely, or perhaps she had interpreted him parenthetical, rendering him singular. He blinked the plurality of theories off, one-by-one, while northerly winds crept in, as when death assumes a gentle goodnight, eyelids drawing low their curtains, leaving maestro speculating possibility, suddenly seized in the midst of the opening bars of one such December the Fifth.
The most hated calls came from the drivers stealing a march on the press to get out ahead of an unfolding story before it became someone’s mess. Their chirrupy greetings and coffee-up voices accused the worm end of our day like children at pains to dispel the explosion a smashed vase invites from above by heading it off with an accurate story whose fullness makes loss an effect of larger dynamics and historical precedents in a previously understood cause. Any details we had that CNN missed would put them ahead of the game, saved from the fire with their basket of eggs and us in the omelet again.

Slightly less loathed were calls from the staff of our boss's boss wanting to know what it all meant and what would develop from fragments we gathered today and if we had read their latest assessment, and if we were on the same page, and if there were products or plans to consult them to accurately roll up the change.

Six hours past the last of our deadlines, we shuffle on back to the can. Our own made calls performed with no speeches are a hand stretched thin across wire, smoothing hard knots from the back of our home front in the inexpert rhythm of miss.
Doug Anderson’s most recent book is *Keep Your Head Down: Vietnam, the Sixties, and a Journey of Self-Discovery* (wwnorton, 2009) He has recent poems and prose in *Cutthroat* and *The Massachusetts Review*.

Brittany Cavallaro’s poetry has recently appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal, Blackbird, Gettysburg Review, and Best New Poets 2011*, among others. A finalist for the 2011 Ruth Lilly fellowship, her awards include work-study scholarships from the Bread Loaf Writers Conference and a Distinguished Graduate Student Fellowship from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she is a PhD candidate.

Wanda Coleman is the author of 18 books of poetry and prose, she is a recent contributor to HARRIET, a blog (poetryfoundation.org), occasionally contributes to drgodine.blogspot.com, and is featured in *Writing Los Angeles* (Library of America, 2002), in *Poet’s Market* (2003), and *Quercus Review VI* (2006). She has been an Emmy-winning scriptwriter, and a former columnist for Los Angeles Times magazine; a nominee for poet laureate, California 2005 and for the USA artists fellowship 2007. She was a Gaea fellow at the Sea Change Cottage, Province-town, October 2010. Coleman’s books from Black Sparrow Books (Godine) are *Bathwater Wine*, winner of the 1999 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize—the first African-American woman to receive it, and *Mercurochrome* (poems), bronze-medal finalist, National Book Awards 2001. Her honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. She writes fiction as well (*A War of Eyes and Other Stories* and the novel *Mambo Hips and Make Believe*). She was C.O.L.A.’s first literary fellow, Dept. of Cultural Affairs, Los Angeles, 2003-04. Her most recent books include *Ostinato Vamps* (Pitt Poetry Series), *The Riot Inside Me: Trials & Tremors* (nonfiction, Godine/Black Sparrow) and WANDA COLEMAN: Poems Seismic in Scene (de la chienne) - Mise en page et calligraphies/layout and illumination by Jean-Jacques Tachdjian, *Lille*, France, spring 2006. A second collection of stories, *Jazz & Twelve O’Clock Tales* was published in 2008 from Black Sparrow Books (finalist for the Patterson Fiction Prize 2009). *The World Falls Away* is forthcoming in 2011 (Pitt Poetry Series).
**Connie A. Lopez-Hood** serves as senior editor of *shuf*, an online poetry journal that publishes cyber/viral poetics. She spear-headed and edited the chapbook anthology, *Blankets & Other Poems: Poetry for the People of Japan*, in which all proceeds were donated to Red Cross Japan Relief. Her work appeared or is forthcoming in *The Newer York, Aperçus Quarterly, Gaga Stigmata, Our Stories Literary Journal, Polari Journal, Lingerpost, Subliminal Interiors*, and others. She holds an MFA in Poetry and is a co-collaborator on two chapbooks, *Operation: Lifted Flowers* and *The New Apocrypha*. She lives in the Southern California mountains with her poet-spouse, two artsy step-kids, and three wily rescue dogs.

**Liam Corley** was deployed to Afghanistan during the 2008-2009 academic year. He teaches American literature at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

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**Melisa Garcia** is a Salvadoran and Guatemalan poet from Riverside, she is also a poetry editor for *the Mosaic Art & Literary Journal*. In the Summer of 2011 she was awarded a scholarship to attend the poetry intensive workshop at the Idyllwild Arts Program. She has also been published in *Huizache Literary Magazine*. She has participated twice in the Riverside Art Museum Creative Writing Internship.

**Lauren Henley**’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *River Styx, A River and Sound Review, Prick of the Spindle*, and other places. She lives with her husband and dogs in Joshua Tree, CA.

**Sean Davis** is a Purple Heart recipient who spent 16 years in the US Military as an infantryman and left as a platoon sergeant. Sean has a BA in English from Portland State University and a MFA in Fiction from Pacific University. He edits *Hubris Press* and is also a consulting editor at the *Silk Road Review*. His stories have appeared in *The Willamette Week, Ooligan Press Editor’s Choice Anthology*, and many other publications.
A Pushcart Prize nominee, Anne Kaier’s recent work, in poetry and nonfiction, appears in The Kenyon Review, The Gettysburg Review, Bellingham Review, Paradigm, Tiny Lights, Under the Sun, The Journal of Investigative Dermatology, Philadelphia Poets, and other venues. Poems and an essay are included in Beauty is a Verb: An Anthology of Poetry, Poetics, and Disability, which is on the American Library Association Notable Books list for 2012. Her poetry chapbook, InFire, was published in 2005. Holding a Ph.D. from Harvard University, she teaches literature and creative writing at Arcadia University and Rosemont College in suburban Philadelphia.

André Katkov graduated with his BA in creative writing from CSUSB, where he is currently pursuing his MFA in poetry. He engages in various creative outlets holding to the belief that each work is worth its weight in time if it can find resonance or bring joy, if even just to a single individual. He hopes to one day invent a new letter that represents the sound made in the initial moments of a static discharge, as well as discover a cure for the need to discover things through years and years of ardent adventuring in distant lands and his own back yard.

Tim Krcmarik is a poet and firefighter in Austin, TX.

Peter LaBerge is an emerging writer/photographer currently in his junior year of high school. His poetry was recognized in the 2011 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, and he was the runner-up for the 2011 Elizabeth Bishop Prize in Verse. His work has been featured in a variety of print and online publications, including The Blue Pencil Online, Polyphony H.S., The Claremont Review, Burnt Bridge, and Bluestem Magazine. He is the founder of The Adroit Journal (www.adroit.co.nr), and is currently working on his debut full-length collection of works.
Alex Lemon is the author of Happy: A Memoir and three collections of poetry: Mosquito, Hallelujah Blackout, and Fancy Beasts. He lives in Ft. Worth, Texas, and teaches at Texas Christian University.

Luis Lopez-Maldonado was born and raised in Santa Ana, California. His work has been seen in The American Poetry Review, Spillway, Packinghouse Review and Cloudbank. He is currently single and living in Orange County.

Ryan Mattern is a 23-year-old senior studying creative writing at California State University, San Bernardino. His work has been featured in The Toucan, Criminal Class Review, Halfnelson, and This Paper City.

Jonathan Maule lives with his wife and dogs in Joshua Tree, CA, where he spends his time playing drums, writing, throwing rocks at sticks, and remaining skeptical.

Robert Morgan is the author of fourteen books of poetry, most recently Terroir, 2011. He has also published three works of nonfiction, including Boone: A Biography and Lions of the West, 2011. He has published eight volumes of fiction, including the bestselling novel Gap Creek. A sequel, The Road From Gap Creek, will be published in 2013. He has received the Hanes Poetry Prize from the Fellowship of Southern Writers, the Thomas Wolfe Award, an O. Henry Prize for short fiction, and an Academy Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. A native of western North Carolina, he has taught since 1971 at Cornell University, where he is Kappa Alpha Professor of English.

Dr. Oslice was born in the sweltering heat of mid-California in the mid-eighties. His mother gave birth in an almond orchard outside Bakersfield, and the Doc. has had a lethal addiction to the nut since. He received his PhD. in the Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives with a focus in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes at the “Spiritual Fine and Interpretive Art Institute of Taft, CA”. He currently resides in Bermuda Dunes.
D. A. Powell’s most recent collection is *Useless Landscape, or A Guide for Boys*. He lives in San Francisco.

Matthew J. Sandmeier, born and bred in the badlands of Southern California, is a literature major at Cal State San Bernardino.

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A.N. Teibe A native of Northern Utah, A.N. Teibe now makes her home up a dry Southern California canyon. She likes the heat and the hills. Her work has been published in *Ekphrasis, Fifth Wednesday, Sand Canyon Review*, and Riverside Art Museum’s In Print journal. She is currently at work on a manuscript titled *Imprint Split*.

Maria Garcia Teutsch is an ex-pat living in Malaysia, but also returns to her home in California quarterly. She has published over 20 books of poetry as editor for The Homestead Review, and Ping-Pong literary journals. She teaches poetry and creative writing at Hartnell College in Salinas, California. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Chronicles on Violence*, and *Pussy*, both published by the Henry Miller Memorial Library in Big Sur, California. She has been published in many journals including *Prairie Schooner, The Lullwater Review, Cold Mountain Review, The South Carolina Review, The Cafe Review, Otoliths, The Porter Gulch Review, Whole Beast Rag* and *Women’s Arts Quarterly*. mariateutsch.blogspot.com
**Brian Turner** is the author of two collections of poetry—*Here, Bullet* and *Phantom Noise*—the former of which won numerous awards, including the 2005 Beatrice Hawley Award and the 2007 Poets Prize. His work has been published in *Poetry Daily, The Virginia Quarterly Review, The Georgia Review, The Best American Poetry 2007*, and others. Turner is a United States Army veteran, and was an infantry team leader for a year in the Iraq War beginning November 2003, with the 3rd Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division. He currently teaches at Sierra Nevada College at Lake Tahoe.


**Sarah Bay Williams** Sarah Bay Williams is an independent curator, writer, and piñata-maker who recently received her master’s degree in art history from the University of California, Riverside. There, she focused on contemporary art and wrote her thesis on the 1970s photography of the artist Robert Cumming. Before UCR, Sarah was a research fellow in the photography department at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where she contributed curatorially and programmatically to the exhibitions Assembly: Eight Emerging Photographers From Southern California, and New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape. She also served as website producer and event and garden coordinator for EATLACMA, LACMA’s ten-month collaboration with the artists’ collective Fallen Fruit. Previous to LACMA, Sarah was head of the communications photography department at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles. She lives in Venice, California.
Yazmin Wheelock  Yazmin Wheelock is an undergraduate student at CSUSB, where she studies both Creative Writing and Gender and Sexuality Studies. She divides her time between managing the SMSU Women’s Resource Center, and writing non-fiction, poetry and short stories. Born in Colotlán, Jalisco, Mexico, and raised in the suburbs of Los Angeles, Wheelock currently resides in the Inland Empire. This is her second publication with Badlands and she also has poetry featured in The Pacific Review.