

BADLANDS

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Issue Two
October 2011

Badlands is published annually by the Palm Desert Campus of California State University, San Bernardino. Copyright © 2011. *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.

The editors would like to thank Dean Fred Jandt, Chair Delgado, and the IRP Committee for their continuing support.

Badlands submissions have moved online and are now hosted at green submissions: <http://greensubmissions.com/35/badlands/index.php>. The 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.

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

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 Nonfiction, 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: Taken by Kelley Byrd on Valentines Day at the Salton Sea, Ca. ISO 100, f/8.0, 1/250.

Correction: "La Casa de Mae Rim," appeared in page 44 of our first edition of *Badlands*. We incorrectly attributed the work to Jay Lewenstein, but the poem's author is Mariano Zaro. We apologize for the error. It is a pleasure to be able to republish this poem with its proper attribution.

Printed in Canada.

BADLANDS

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from
The Lost Notebooks of
Juan Sweeney de las
Minas de Cobre

TRANSLATED BY CHAD SWEENEY

Little is known about the life of Juan Sweeney de las Minas de Cobre. He grew up between Andalusia, Ireland, Oklahoma and Bolivia, lived centuries ago and has yet to be born. Vicente Huidobro wrote in a letter to Sweeney, “Reading these poems, one desires annihilation and love in equal measures. One tastes metal, as of an asteroid belt of old trains passing overhead.” Juan Sweeney preferred riding on the backs of trains to being seated inside; he loved cheese and whiskey and has often been compared to the troubadour poet, Cavalcanti, for his lifestyle of iconoclasm and intrigues with women of court. He inspired the characterization of Cervantes’ journeyman, Don Quixote, and paradoxically of Byron’s archetypical hero.

From what can be gathered, Sweeney’s books included *Instructions to My Translator*, *Wet Book of the Otter*, *The Iconoclast’s Secret Window*, and *Shouts from the Copper Mines*. All that remains of Juan Sweeney’s vast production are the fragments contained here. Nearing the time of Sweeney’s disappearance, he burned all personal copies of his books, and in the years following, his books were mysteriously removed from the world’s major libraries. It is rumored that a complete set of his works remains in a locked room in the Library of Tlón, to which no one has gained access in centuries. Luckily, Sweeney’s cousin Alicia Ramirez Ortega Hurtado Matamoros Pardo Casado Santamaría Bustos Hortigüela López López read the madness in his eyes, and before Juan began his rampage, she hid this small sheaf of pages—which I discovered in 2005.

Sweeney famously claimed that he thought in English but wrote in Spanish, so that the executioners of the Inquisition and the future fascists of the Spanish Civil War would “choke to death” on his poems. For this reason, I have committed to translating Juan Sweeney’s poems back into English, the language of his thoughts. I found these shreds of paper in the walls of the ancestral Sweeney castle in Oklahoma, where I was born and where Sweeney de las Minas de Cobre presumably passed away, though his body soon after disappeared from the family crypt.

Admittedly, I do not like his poetry much and have tried to improve on it when possible. Nevertheless, the work of Juan Sweeney de las Minas de Cobre has branded me forever, and I cannot look away.

—Chad Sweeney

1.

Por lo menos mis mentiras son honestas.

La noche va afinando sus guitarras,
lanzando sus magnolias al desarreglo,

y tejiendo su burda lana
desde las últimas estrofas del crepúsculo.

Tanto de mi identidad es química cerebral
que me cuido como de un ataque epiléptico.

Cada mañana ando en busca

de todo lo que he perdido,
cartas románticas escritas para tiranos,

enciclopedias de idiomas muertos.
Pues,

los dientes de león se rebelan
contra las matemáticas.

Todos odian a sus dueños.

1

At least my lies are honest.

Night goes tuning its guitars,
tossing its magnolias into disarray,

and spinning a rough wool
from the last stanzas of dusk.

So much of me is brain chemistry
which I tend like an epileptic fit.

Each morning I go in search

of all I've misplaced,
love letters to tyrants,

encyclopedias in dead languages.
Just so,

the dandelions revolt
against mathematics.

Everything hates what owns it.

3

Es muy fácil acusar a Dios
por cometer infanticidio,

pues, yo acuso a los sacerdotes
quienes cuidan a nuestra España

como cuidarían a un cementerio.
Sería mejor ser un hombre con una escoba,

barriendo la arena de la playa.
Cuando usted traduce esto,

no traduzca esto.

3

It's too easy to accuse God
of infanticide,

so I accuse the priests
who tend our Spain

as one would tend a cemetery.
Better to be a man with a broom

sweeping sand from the beach.
When you translate this

don't translate this.

5

He crecido con la gente de los cerros.
Era uno de ellos. Íbamos al mercado

montados en las ovejas
y nos casábamos con las primeras caderas que nos amaran.

El bigote negro de mi abuela
se ha trenzado para encuadrar su boca.

Mirando dentro de la boca, podía ver
años hacia el futuro,

un molino de viento y unas gallinas,
su lengua negra y muerta.

Ella me contó la leyenda
del hombre catalán que transportó

la luna en su remolque.
Ella me dijo que fui adoptado,

me mandó a la tienda por cigarros.

5

I grew among the hill people.
I was one of them. We rode

our sheep to market
and married the first hips loved us.

My grandmother's black mustache
braided into a frame for her mouth.

Staring into her mouth I could see
years into the future,

a windmill and some chickens,
her dead black tongue.

She told me the legend
of a Catalonian man who hauled away

the moon in a dump truck.
She told me I was adopted,

then sent me to the store for cigarettes.

7

La piel parecía empañada,
un tono de verde.
Salí al aire, arrastrando el yunque

por su correa de seda. ¡Ven Ronin!
El mundo tan nuevo, el mercurio
se colgó de las hojas. En todas partes

las espadas estaban metidas
en malaquita y los niños practicaban
para ser el rey. Nuestras maestras

se lamentan como las meigas
cuando recogieron las cabras.
Las cercas y los barrotes se doblaron

hacia el vudu magnético de mi anillo.
Un sonido terrorífico se hinchó,
tuve que correr.

Corrí cuesta abajo y gané velocidad.
Recordé saludar a la Señorita Muñoz
y a la Señora Castilla y al Padre O'Leary.

Esther estaba terminando
el primer reloj hecho de gorriones.
El tiempo sangraba por los huesos de sus alas.

7

My skin was looking tarnished,
a shade of green.
I went out into the air pulling my anvil

on its silk leash. Come Ronin!
The world so new, mercury
hung from leaves. Everywhere

swords were stuck
in malachite and boys practiced
to be king. Our teachers

keened like banshees
when they gathered in the goats.
Fences and jail bars bent

toward my ring's magnetic shiz.
A terrific sound was bulging,
I had to run.

I ran downhill and picked up speed.
I remembered to wave to Señorita Muñoz
and Señora Castil and Father O'Leary.

Esther was finishing
the first clock made of sparrows.
Time hemorrhaged from their wing bones.

8

Me paraba como un árbol y temblaba
cuando soplaba el viento.

Los pájaros carpinteros me miraban
por si acaso estaba planeando un ataque.

Sí, yo estaba planeando un ataque.

8

I stood like a tree and
fluttered when the wind blew.

Woodpeckers watched me carefully
in case I was planning an attack.

I was planning an attack.

9

Nací en un orfanato de fuego.
Comí los corderos de Caeiro.

Yo asesiné a las trincheras del crepúsculo
y castigué a los carpinteros de ataúdes.

Lavé los pechos de madreperla
de la Reina Isabel

y las uñas de una vieja chucha
bajo el puente de Tlön.

Soy lo que la noche ha tosido en su costa.

Subí al faro con un cuchillo
entre los dientes,

subí en línea recta por las rocas,
una forma negra y furtiva entre las olas.

Nada me pudo impedir
agarrar el foco y escribir mi nombre

en el fondo de las nubes.

9

I was born in an orphanage of fire.
I fed on Caeiro's sheep.

I assassinated the trenchcoats of the crepusculum
and punished the coffin-makers.

I washed the mother-of-pearl
breasts of Queen Isabel

and the toenails of an old mutt bitch
beneath the bridge to Tlön.

I am what the night coughed up on its shore.

I climbed the lighthouse
with a knife between my teeth,

straight up from the rocks,
a black and furtive shape among swells.

Nothing prevented me from seizing hold
the searchlight and writing my name

on the bottom of clouds.

10

Si perdiera la concentración
la estructura del edificio

se licuaría

o los coches se caerían del puente
o los lenguajes llegarían a ser una plaga

o la américa futura colonizaría
la américa presente

o un dolor de cabeza herviría sobre la cordillera
o escondería mis ojos dentro de mis ojos

y cruzaría un ataque de tos, hacia ti,
el mapa mojado en whisky, los camiones de bomberos

rodeándonos . . .

¡Aléjate! ¡Tal vez yo te muerda!
¡Tal vez te venda algo inútil!

Quizás te robe los documentos
y me escape a hurtadillas por la puerta del motel.

Je deteste.
J'adore.

Salpico el piso con calcetines.

10

If I lose my concentration
the foundations of this building

will liquify

or cars will drift off the overpass
or language will become a plague

or the future america will colonize
the present america

or a headache will boil over the ridge
or I will hide my eyes inside my eyes

and cross a fit of coughing, toward you,
map doused in whiskey, the firetrucks

circling . . .

—get back! I might bite!
I might sell you something useless!

I might steal your documents
and slip out the motel door.

Je deteste.
J'adore.

I strew socks across the floor.

11

Mientras los crepúsculos de la guerra civil
íbamos cogidos de la mano
entre los pinos.

Colgaban cuerpos de los recién-muertos
como linternas
por las ramas.

Cuando uno intentaba mordernos
lo pinchábamos con un palo.

Cuando era nuestro
lo llevábamos a casa
para lavarlo.

11

Those twilights of civil war,
we went among the pines
holding hands.

New corpses hung
like lanterns
from the branches.

If one tried to bite
we poked it with a stick.

If it was ours
we took it home
and washed it.

14

La luz se cayó como ramas de vidrio.

¡La luz

en los arcos! ¡Luz sobre las chimeneas!

Nuestros ciudadanos huyeron

cruzando el terreno aluvial

arrastrando sus pañuelos blancos

6 bloques, 3 kilómetros y 8 kilómetros

atrás. Pájaros de carbón

se colgaron desde las nubes

en esculturas radiantes de lamento.

Escapándonos de las iglesias

en parejas

en cuartetos

en trajes nupciales con clavos

en las bocas.

El viento diciendo Anda-

Lucía,

los torreones mirándonos huir.

14

Light fell heavily in branches of glass.
Light

on the arches! Light on the chimneys!
Our citizens were fleeing

across the flood plain
trailing their white scarves

6 blocks, 3 miles and 8 miles
behind them. Coal birds

hung from clouds
in mobiles radiant with grief.

Running away from the churches
in pairs

in quintets
in green wedding dresses with nails

in our mouths.
The wind saying, Anda-

Lucía,
the guardtowers watching us go.

15

Al fin, me pasaré mi propia muerte durmiendo.
Estaré en otro lugar

cuando mi nombre sea dicho
como la beta silenciosa dentro de la madera.

Me negaré a firmar el certificado.

Pasaré al lado de los oficiales
estudiando mi reloj como alguien importante

tarde para un encuentro. Entonces, mis queridos
hombres y mujeres, amantes de siglos futuros,

buscadme en las escaleras
que suben por la nieve hacia la no puerta,

buscadme en las huellas digitales dejadas en las vidrieras,
en las teorías no publicadas de los sicólogos,

buscad en los bolsillos de los abrigos y en los anuncios
y en las cicatrices jeroglíficas detrás de las rodillas,

y si no estoy allí, buscadme en el sonido
que hace el tiempo cuando se raja.

15

In the end I'll sleep through my own death.
I'll be somewhere else

when my name is spoken
like the silent grain inside the wood.

I'll refuse to sign the certificate.

I'll walk right past the officers
studying my watch like someone important

late for a meeting. So, my dear men
and women lovers of future centuries,

look for me on the steps
that climb the snow toward no door,

look for me in fingerprints left on store windows,
in the unpublished theories of psychologists,

look in coat pockets and want-ads
and in the hieroglyphic scars behind your knees,

and if I'm not there, look in the sound
time makes when it cracks.

17

Yo andaba para vivir entre los comedores de piedras,
y ella en la ciudad ciega.

Me dormí dentro de la flor de hielo
y ella dentro del alfabeto.

Yo le vendí los padrenuestros a la bruja de los ríos.
Ella afiló su última flecha.

Sus vestiduras maduraban en los olivares.
Dejé que sus sombras surcaran el camino.

Me robó los cumpleaños de mis primeras memorias.
Me bañaba en la ceniza de sus golondrinas.

17

I went to live among the stone eaters,
and she into the blind city.

I slept inside the ice flower
and she inside the alphabet.

I sold my prayers to the river witch.
She sharpened her last arrow.

Her vestments ripened in the olive groves.
I let their shadows furrow the road.

She pilfered the birthdays from my memory.
I bathed in the ash of her swallows.

19

He trabajado en secreto durante tres años
en el sótano de la casa del alcalde,
tratando de perfeccionar la antibomba.

Se implosiona
trayendo todo sufrimiento hacia ella misma
como una carretilla de sombreros de viudas.

Pondré estas antibombas en todas partes,
mis poemas,
mis estrellas negras y resplandecientes.

19

For three years I've labored in secret
in the basement of the mayor's mansion
trying to perfect the anti-bomb.

It implodes
drawing all suffering inside it
like a wheelbarrow of widows' hats.

I will place these anti-bombs everywhere,
my poems,
my bright black stars.

20

Me levanté temprano, tres vueltas
alrededor del foso,
una ciudad de campaña de exilio,
cercada por tulipanes,
rodeada por perros,
un arado para sembrar el mar.

Idolotramos los tótems
ancestrales: el leproso,
el payaso,
el tabernero y la tejedora
brillaban en la madera,
la gravedad
lloviendo en vectores
invisibles.

De repente quise
devolver todas las lenguas,
el tiempo fue
mi pantalla,
y la matriz era una ventana
pequeña.

Por cuarenta años había pasado de contrabando mi culpa
por la oscuridad de suave brillo,
y aún así las hormigas
no se quadaron donde las puse.

¡He cosechado las naranjas en Catamarca!
¡He montado en el fantasma del penúltimo búfalo!

20

I rose early, three laps
around the moat,
a tent city of exiles
circumscribed by tulips,
surrounded by dogs,
a plow to sow the sea.

We worshipped ancestral
totems: the leper,
the clown,
the barkeep and weaver
glowed within the wood,
vectors of gravity
raining
invisibly down.

Suddenly I wanted
to give all the languages back,
the weather was
my lampshade,
the womb a tiny
window.

Forty years I smuggled my guilt
through lambent dark, and still
the ants
wouldn't stay where I put them.

I harvested oranges in Catamarca!
I rode the ghost of the second-to-last buffalo!

Ola

FRANCISCO MARTÍNEZ NEGRETE

Se tarda el mar
en volver a besarla
en tanto queda
desnuda arena
desabrigada y muerta
de sed al vivo
al aciago
repiqueo del sol
:
sus mil lenguas
hurgándola
sin tregua,
secándola y
cuarteándola
de sed.

Lejanas
las gaviotas
anuncian
su llegada.

And Out

FRANCISCO MARTÍNEZ NEGRETE

Anduve de tu viudo, plañidero
de no tenerte más sino en la mente
vestida de nostalgia
de tu cuerpo de diosa
y de tu *bleeding heart* en la entrepierna.
Anduve entre las calles repitiendo tu nombre
el viento dijo no reconocerte
las esquinas contritas me volvieron la espalda
los pájaros danzaron un instante
tu nombre entre las nubes
lo dispersaron luego
y las gotas de lluvia y las hojas caídas
a mitad de la tarde
señas equívocas me dieron de tu paso.
Anduve sin cuartel, anduve lleno
de ti, iluminado
de ti ya sin saber dónde tirarte
qué hacer con esta bruma
de ti que me dejaras
en vez de corazón.

La casa de Mae Rim (poema 24)

MARIANO ZARO

Camino por los pasillos del hospital.
No debería mirar
dentro de las habitaciones
pero veo a un anciano que llora
junto a su mujer.
No sé si es su mujer,
lo supongo.
La puerta está abierta de par en par.
La mujer todavía respira
hundida en la cama
con dos almohadas
bajo la cabeza.
Me acerco.
Está dormida,
está más que dormida.

Él le quita las gafas,
los pendientes de oro
con forma de trébol,
la dentadura postiza
que se despegaba
con ruido de ventosa
y tiene garfios de plata en los extremos.
También intenta quitarle
el anillo de bodas
pero ella tiene las manos hinchadas.
Él entonces se inclina
y le chupa el dedo

varias veces
como perro torpe y obsesivo.
El hombre se saca el anillo de la boca
y lo guarda en la palma de la mano
con las demás cosas:
reliquias,
huesos de pájaros
metálicos manchados por la vida.

Ella desploma la cabeza a la derecha.
Tiene el cuello hecho de nubes.
Su cara es la cara de todos los muertos.

El hombre no la besa,
ni siquiera le toca la frente
cuando los camilleros se la llevan
hacia el frío
donde ella extenderá manteles nuevos
y pondrá la mesa
con copas altas
y guirnaldas
hasta que lleguemos.

The House of Mae Rim (poem 24)

MARIANO ZARO

I walk through the hospital hallways.
I shouldn't look
inside the bedrooms
but I see an old man crying
next to his wife.
I don't know if she is his wife,
that's what I suppose.
The door is wide open.
The woman still breathes,
sunken in a small bed
with two pillows
under her head.
I get closer.
She is asleep—
more than asleep.

He removes her eyeglasses,
the small gold earrings
shaped as clovers
and the denture
that comes out with the noise
of a suction cup
and has silver hooks at the edge.
He tries to remove
her wedding band
but her hands are swollen
and he has to bend over
and lick her finger

several times
like an obsessive, clumsy dog.
He takes the ring out of his mouth
and keeps it on the palm of his hand
with the other things—
relics,
bones of metallic birds
stained by life.

She tilts her head to the right.
Her neck is made of clouds.
Her face is the face of all the dying.

He doesn't kiss her.
He doesn't even touch her forehead
when the nurses carry her away
into the cold
where she will spread brand new tablecloths
and will set the table
with tall glasses
and garlands
until we arrive.

Vieraskirja (Guest book)

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

Per a Anu Partanen, Merja Virolainen and Hanna Ojala.

(Poema escrit al llibre de visita de Villa Kivi,

carrer Linnunlauluntie -Birdsong Road.

Casa d'hostes per a escriptors a Hèlsinki.)

Diuen que la veritat es troba en el detall.

No manca en aquest llibre la pauta per
escriure recte en qualsevol idioma.

Que a Villa Kivi no manca cap minúcia:

l'ambientador al lavabo, el llac a fora,

l'antiarna dins l'armari, en forma de flor.

Cafetera i tetera comunals. Tiretes pels

poetes caminaires i una guardiola per

col·laborar. Silenci i llibertat són l'únic luxe.

I és una primavera assolellada després de

molta neu: certa felicitat només segueix a

la tristesa. Altra felicitat prové del fet de

tocar-se els extrems: el Sud-Sud i el Nord-Nord

són germans humilment. Com quan la Praxis

balla amb la Teoria (tot i que jo hi vaig poc, a

aquestes festes).

Hi ha fins i tot una manera de ser feliç quan no

t'ho passes bé: si escrius algun poema. O dos.

Que tots els sentiments inclouen

el sentiment contrari: el riure és dins l'enuig

si crides en veu baixa.

Mai no haguessis pensat que les maduixes,

a Finlàndia, fossin, sense cap dubte

les millors.

Vieraskirja (Guest book)

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

*For Anu Partanen, Merja Virolainen and Hanna Ojala.
(Poem for the Guest book at Villa Kivi,
Linnunlauluntiekatu, Birdsong Road,
a guest house for writers in Helsinki.)*

It's said that truth is in the details.
It's not missing from this book then, the pattern
to guide your lines in any language.
Nor is anything missing in Villa Kivi:
the air freshener in the bathroom, the lake outside,
the fly-swatter by the cupboard, flower-shaped.
The kettle and coffee pot for sharing, the Band-Aids
for walking poets, a cashbox to be
collaborative. Silence and freedom are the only luxuries.
And it is a sunny spring after
a snowy winter. Only a certain joy follows grief.
Other joy, it comes from touching
the extremes: The South-South and North-North,
the brothers of humility. As when Praxis
dances with Theory (even if I rarely run out
to these parties).
There's even a way of being happy when you're not
having a good time: by writing a poem. Maybe two.
As every feeling includes its opposite,
laughing is inside of anger
if you can raise the ceiling while whispering.
You never imagined strawberries
in Finland would be, undoubtedly,
the best you've ever eaten.

One Percent of What Rattles Around in the Chick Singer's Head...

ELISA URMSTROM

Chord charts

Lyrics

Agents' phone numbers

The faces of friends you haven't seen in months

It isn't personal

The driving distance between Las Vegas and Reno, Winnemucca to
Wendover

The band house will always suck. Travel with Lysol and your own pillow
Don't eat the turkey in the EDR of the Golden Nugget, but they have a
Froot Loop dispenser that's pretty cool

They don't really like California bands in Phoenix

The truck stop outside Gallup has okay food and clean bathrooms

The graveyard shift in Wendover...again

It isn't personal

Price minus the 15% agent's fee nets you...

Tear down in Tucson at 2:00 a.m., sound check in Albuquerque the next day
at noon

Who did you piss off in your last life to deserve this? I hope you enjoyed it
Agents are the devil, it isn't personal

Repeat after me: the soundman is God. Repeat it until you believe it. No.
Really.

If you wear your belt buckle straight on, you'll scratch up the back of your
guitar

Drummers are always weird, guitar players tend to be ...players, keyboard
players are inevitably control freaks

The time a keyboard player actually handed you a chart for Brick House—all two chords of it

You should have been there when your uncle passed away

You should have been there for Christmas/Thanksgiving/His graduation/Her birthday/Their wedding/Your life/don't you *dare* cry

It isn't personal

The things that get lost on the road: boyfriends, friends, sunglasses, guitars... time...but

Everything is somewhere

Where did that woman get that fabulous dress? And I want her boots

Does this mascara smell like it's gone bad to you?

If you wear your watch on the inside of your wrist, you can discretely check the time as you play without making the audience think you're bored

The ticking of your biological clock

The expiration date stamped somewhere on your forehead

Chickens and Bears and Froot Loops in plexiglass boxes

That guy flirting with you?

It isn't personal

The weird stuff drunks choose to tell you sometimes. Lest you think I go home with pocketfuls of phone numbers scribbled on bar napkins, no. I go home knowing 1% of the static you see on a TV is a remnant of the Big Bang, because a drunk astrophysicist told me so one night at a Denim and Diamonds in Albuquerque. I looked it up. It's true. They think.

Everything is somewhere.

You should have been there.

An Exquisite Grammatology

DEREK POLLARD WITH KEVIN MCLELLAN

The Horse Is Dead Jim Joe
Painted on the wall
Across the street

Along the windowsill
In our fogged kitchen
My fingernails linger
Over the chipped
And peeling paint

I am thinking
The kettle's shrill whistle
Then the kettle's shrill
Whistle *Greyness*
Then this hampered grey

The trouble with daylight
With this fading double
Exposure is the intersection
Of your question
And the list of your blank

Stare All of it false
So when I say *Promise*
I am left with

Rocky Road

ANNA LOOMIS

On occasion, Alice and Aidan would arm wrestle; and on occasion, Aidan would win. Alice would find this amusing later. For the time being, Alice did not mind that she could beat Aidan at arm wrestling; however, she did mind that he weighed significantly less than she did.

Aidan stood just three inches above Alice. This meant that he too was also rather short. Alice justified this by upholding the fact that he was, in fact taller than her, nearly three inches taller. This seemed to suffice as an explanation whenever Alice's decision was questioned.

Aidan normally went for girls who wore a bit more black. He had bought rocky road ice cream from her twelve times now, and he knew her name was Alice. Alice had red hair that peeked out from under her hat, and green eyes that often looked bored from behind the vats of confections. Aidan ordered his rocky road ice cream, and went outside to wait on the bench for Alice's approaching cigarette break.

Alice walked outside, leaned into her corner and lit up. The rocky road guy, Aidan, was lying on the bench with his knees up. She could see his black spiked hair, his studded belt, and his band shirt staring at her. He had two years on her, she had just turned 18.

"Would you want to go out to dinner sometime?" Alice put her cigarette down, "Sure." She didn't have anything else to do.

Aidan asked Alice out from the horizontal position on the bench. He had seen her through the empty space between his knees.

On their third date, they had spaghetti in a cheap Italian resultant, over a red checked table clothes and next to fake red roses.

Afterwards they kissed until Aidan stated his next proposition, "I have a condom?" "Sure." Alice cracked every knuckle that she could.

They slept together on a blanket in the back of his station wagon.

These were the circumstances. Aidan and Alice spent most of their time at inexpensive restaurants. Before or after dinner they would sleep together in Aidan's wagon, on deserted playgrounds, in movie theaters, empty parking lots, and in public restrooms; space and opportunity presented themselves. Friday nights were reserved for evenings spent at the church Aidan worked at. He played piano for the choirs and services. He was given keys to use for rehearsal purposes. After study groups had left, Aidan and Alice would sprawl out in hallways and the bridal lounge rehearsing themselves.

On date seven, he told her he loved her. "Babe, I'm falling for you." She would later realize that he loved the sex, although she wasn't sure why.

He would ask her to talk dirty to him. She felt like she was lying when she tried. Alice would lower her voice in an attempt to sound sexy, but she almost consistently formed the phrases as questions. "I want you, I want you now?" "Take me now?"

Aidan would often try to pin Alice down. This was difficult, because although Alice was petite, she was stronger than she looked. In the frequent moments that Aidan's strength faltered, her arms would move upward like a surfacing swimmer. This was not the desired effect. Aidan also told her that strangulation would enhance their experience. "It'll make it better Babe, I promise." The only thing that was enhanced were the bruises that darkened on Alice's neck. It became clear to Aidan, that if he was going to dominate, he would need to find a smaller girl.

The day after their three-month anniversary, Aidan called Alice to say goodnight. "Hey Babe, we need to talk."

"Yes?" Alice stared at the popcorn ceiling of her room.

"I can't be with you anymore."

"I hate you too."

"No Babe, really we can't be together."

"I can't stand you anymore." She stifled her own laugh.

"I'm trying to be honest here."

"I honestly think you're awful."

"I'm not fucking kidding Alice! It's over. I'm done."

Alice and Aidan frequently joked about the termination of their relationship; this was always done over the phone.

"You're doing this over the phone?"

“Babe, that’s how I feel, I just need some time on my own. I need to focus on me.”

“You couldn’t tell me tomorrow?”

“There’s a sense of urgency to these emotions Alice; I had to tell you immediately.”

“Fuck your sense of urgency.” Alice hung up the phone and reorganized her closet.

Alice walked to Coffee Catch, one of her favorite places to relax. It had a bright orange interior, green covered chairs, and glass vases that covered shelves and tables throughout the café. She sat down at her table and saw a studded belt, spiked hair, and a very short blonde. The girl was at least six inches shorter than Alice. She now understood Aidan’s sense of urgency. Alice left her Latte at the table and approached Aidan.

Alice sat down.

“Hi there, lost a bet. Care to arm wrestle?”

The blond giggled “Me or him?”

“I urgently want to return to my coffee, the cream is just so good today. He’ll take less time, I doubt he’ll lose to a girl.”

She grabbed his hand.

“You don’t mind do you? I’m sure it’ll be over immediately.”

He glanced at the blond “No, yea that’s, that’s fine.”

The blonde counted them off, and they began. Alice squeezed Aidan’s hand and dug her nails into his skin. He winced but said nothing. She pulled down towards her elbow. Aidan began to make slow progress. He got closer and closer to pinning her down. She continued to hold him off, and then Alice felt Aidan twitch. She dug deeper into his skin and slowly began to overturn him. Aidan hadn’t realized she had been toying with him. Aidan looked at Alice, pleaded with his eyes and knew his face was becoming red. His bicep burned and he felt his hand slam on the table. Blondie looked at Aidan, looked at Alice, and said nothing. Alice stood up.

“He’s really fond of arm wrestling, just an FYI.” Alice winked at the blonde and walked through the bright orange doors.

Pillow Talk

LARRY EBY

Remember the frogs we used to catch down the river where the rocks tumbled, and when we found the box of matches that burnt down the gulch: ablaze where the old stone-mason lived— remember? The frogs we used to catch croaked all night long like broad wooden chimes, slightly louder than the trickling river, and when we found the box of matches they were together with Fuji apples batched in that small, wooden, picnic basket labeled, “Remember the Frogs.” We used to chase fireflies floating above the reeds, approach quietly and try to catch one. We missed and when we found that box of matches we became our own coaches, overlighting campfires where the stone mason lived, speaking of the frogs we used to catch, and how we found that box of matches.

Talk in Malibu

MARIANO ZARO

I pay in cash at the front desk.
The room is under your name.
I pay in cash before we go upstairs.
I don't want to be bothered the next day
with the transaction.
I don't want anybody to know that I am here.
I pay in cash, almost 200 dollars.
The room is in Malibu,
in a hotel in Malibu.

I lie to everybody today.
I tell my friends in the North
that I am in the South.
I tell my friends in the South
that I don't know where I will be this evening.

I don't lie to you.
I tell you that I will pick you up at 4:00
and there I am, at four, and there you are—
with no luggage, only a small brown paper bag
and a sweater. You wait with a paper bag
and a sweater. I will lie to you later.
We will lie to each other.

We go to Malibu,
to a hotel room in Malibu—
at the ocean front,
with a ceiling fan.

In the corridors we see a family with small children. The mother is young, looks friendly. I smile, I don't say anything. I don't want to be seen. I don't want the kids to know what we are doing.

The room is white, not new, old enough to feel real. It has vines outside, like a room in a movie. We open the window, we don't need the ceiling fan.

*

The ocean is loud and close, it pushes against the outside wall, the water splatters the windowsill.

We talk on top of the bed. The ocean keeps pushing. We keep talking.

We talk to hear all we could not say before. For months we have seen each other but we couldn't talk.

Now we talk. We probably have sex in between. We don't stop talking. I get up and go to the bathroom. I come back to bed. The bodies are close, we whisper. We are motionless and, at the same time, we press against each other. The skin feels raw, too hot sometimes. Sometimes we cry. You can cry and talk at the same time. You are very good at it.

We don't stop talking.
We talk our life together.
You imagine what you would tell me when I leave for a long trip,
when I come back, when I wake up cranky,
when I am sick, when you have doubts, when I lose my hair,
when we come home after your father's funeral.
We talk our life together, the life that won't happen.

We don't know how to end the talking,
we don't know how to end the craving.
We want the ocean to revolt
and come through the window and take us.
Take us and finish this talk for us
so we don't have to decide, so we don't have
to hurt each other now that all doors are open
in the chest. We want the ocean to help,
because we don't know,
we don't know how to finish this talk.

The Red Curtain

ADALBERT AREVALO

Rose waterfall
suspended in vertical undulation,
newness faded from
the will of the Sun.

Not Crimson,
simpler,
un-poetic
though domestically charming.

Un-wed wife,
granter of permission
and new life,
be patient with me,

and I'll reward you
with security
for passage through the satin wall to a
rare recess of youthful abandon.

Know my return is certain,
that I fear the day I come to find
no façade
to shield me from your absence.

Desnudez

YOLANDA REISNOSO BARZALLO

La luz del atardecer traspasa el ventanal que mira con su gran ojo de vidrio, desparramándose generosa y ecuánime en el espacio vacío cubierto por una áspera alfombra azul.

La pareja ingresa al departamento desocupado, abrigado de calor solar, oloroso a soledad, casi permisivo de ese eco propio de los sitios que claman por llenarse de muebles y de vida cotidiana, porque para eso fueron construidos.

Fingiéndose inmutable, Ernesto acomoda la sábana sobre la alfombra. La arruga. No se convence, así que hace un par de dobleces y luego la estira.

Sofía lo observa, apoyada en la puerta, de brazos cruzados, con expresión socarrona en su pálido rostro, recordando el día en que la retó a posar. “*Yo no tengo vergüenza de mi cuerpo*”, había dicho ella, asintiendo con naturalidad.

Un hilo de sudor invisible a la femenina mirada, recorre el huesudo pecho de Ernesto, que se debate con su incapacidad para verla sin sonrojarse.

Ahora acomoda los almohadones, preguntándose si ella reparará o no en el temblor de sus manos de artista.

¿Está bien así?, - pregunta sin darse vuelta, esforzándose por no quebrar la voz.

¿Por qué no me miras?...-interroga Sofía, desafiando, sin responder.

Ernesto regresa a mirarla bruscamente, ostentando una serenidad cuya evidente falsedad lo deja al descubierto sin remedio.

... Estás nervioso, ¿cierto?

Ríen a carcajadas. Ella va hacia el baño, arrastrando las últimas convulsiones de risa, mientras él espera, haciendo gestos de susto, procurando ahogar los nervios, pensando que fue errada la propuesta, pues acaso Sofía reaccionará

desmesuradamente al descubrir que él no es siquiera un buen dibujante, menos un experto en trazos de cuerpos en cueros, como le hizo creer, a fin de conseguir verla como tanto ha soñado.

Una lejana esperanza situada al fondo de la ilusión anima a Ernesto, aferrado a la idea de que, quizá con el argumento de conocerla desnuda, logre atarla a él, para que se enamore tanto o tal vez más de lo que él ha estado en los últimos dos años, en que su autoestima se ha anulado al punto de tolerar las elegantes perversidades propias de Sofía. Si no la enamora, al menos lo habrá intentado una vez más.

Desde la calle, llega el rumor de la prisa de una ambulancia. Sofía imagina, mientras se despoja de la falda, un accidente en la avenida más próxima, o la familia de un anciano esperando por oxígeno; es el morbo, aislando la inhibición.

Ernesto la adivina en el cuarto de baño, sin dejar de mirar hacia la puerta, que se abre intempestivamente, tanto como él borra su inquieta sonrisa para fingir gravedad.

Estoy lista - afirma Sofía con tranquilidad.

Acomódate... Yo voy a sentarme... aquí - contesta él simulando sosiego.

Envuelta en la blanca toalla de baño, Sofía se recuesta sobre la sábana. Lo mira sentarse, acomodar el tablero sobre sus piernas cruzadas, afilar la punta del carboncillo, sin premura, en actitud de espera.

Ya puedes quitarte la toalla. Voy a empezar - le dice sin levantar la mirada, mientras hace sobre la alfombra un montón con la viruta del carboncillo.

Ernesto contiene en el pecho la intensidad de un deseo de gritar.

¡Cierra los ojos!- ordena Sofía, imprimiendo fuerza a su voz.

... Pero, si de todos modos voy a verte desnuda...

Lo sé, pero no quiero que veas cuando me quito la toalla -ahora el tono es suave.

Ernesto accede.

¡No puedo hacerlo!, - confiesa Sofía, aferrándose a la toalla que la cubre.

Cierto alivio inunda el interior de Ernesto, pero sus ojos muestran decepción.
Entiende Ernesto, nunca me han visto desnuda.

Toma tu tiempo. Yo espero.

...Te propongo algo...

Ernesto escucha la propuesta. Acepta, como siempre que ella plantea algo, por absurdo que sea. Se desnuda, sin pedirle que retire la mirada que lo escruta con desparpajo, aunque desearía no ser observado así.

Se detiene en su última prenda, la más íntima. Vuelve a sentarse en posición para dibujar.

¿No vas a quitarte los calzoncillos?, - interroga ella, acosando.

Sofía, me desnudé hasta aquí por tu comodidad, pero la modelo eres tú.

Si te desnudaras por completo, estaríamos en igualdad de condiciones, y eso me haría sentirme realmente cómoda.

Se miran fijamente. No pueden sostener más la seriedad y explotan otra vez en carcajadas.

Desde afuera, el sonido de unos frenos los silencia, en espera de un impacto final que no se da.

Ya Sofía, es hora de que esto sea serio. Retira la toalla. Voy a dibujar.

De acuerdo, capitán, - responde llevando la mano izquierda hacia su sien.

Se sienta, cuidando que la toalla no deje entrever nada, fijando los ojos en los de él. Ante su imperturbable quietud, hace ademán de quitarse la toalla, sin consumir el gesto, interrumpiéndolo con un último ruego:

Ernesto, hazlo por mí. Para que me sienta bien. No traigo puesto nada, me ayudaría mucho si tú tampoco.

Desvanecido un fugaz vacío en su estómago, Ernesto se resigna, envuelto en el morbo de la desnudez próxima. De pie y de espaldas a Sofía, retira su prenda íntima rápidamente, exponiendo sus nalgas, parándose luego de frente y mostrando sus protuberancias, sintiendo el sudor recrudescer con el temor de una erección.

Ella lo ve con inocencia, le sonrío.

Él inspira, al borde de la impaciencia.

... Ahora sí te toca, Sofía. Ya retira la toalla de una vez.

De repente, la femenina mirada se torna maliciosa. Se sienta, juntando las manos al centro del nudo hecho en la toalla, justo encima de sus pechos, abriendo el apretado nudo con lentitud. Ernesto siente venir la erección, se cubre con las piernas dobladas por delante, rematando con el tablero de dibujo.

Violentamente, Sofía arroja la toalla a un lado.

La expresión de él evidencia rabia y vergüenza, el cruce de sentimientos que experimenta al verse burlado.

Sofía se retuerce de risa, desordenando lo lineal de la sábana y los almohadones, cubierta aún por las prendas interiores que nunca tuvo intención de quitarse.

Ni el molesto silencio de Ernesto la calla. Lo mira; está tenso y quieto, ruborizado y con sus ojos ardiendo de humillación.

Una última risotada de Sofía agoniza con un par de lágrimas que le caen, calientes y alargadas, hasta el inicio de su terso cuello, y a la conclusión del áspero plan.

Passes damunt la neu a Vila Kantola (Kotka, Finlàndia)

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

*Per a Petri Pietilainen, Merja Virolainen,
Antonio Altarriba, Paula and Esa*

Si Alvar Aalto va posar tantes cadires a la casa
és per a què vinguessin els amics.
I tanmateix, a Finlàndia, les cases estan sempre
una mica separades... si el mar glaçat no
escurça les distàncies.

Caminar sobre el mar, era possible.
Calia venir al Nord en el pic de l'hivern.

I el mar en trepitjar-lo diu de vegades coses.
Petites amenaces de quebrar-se que no es
compleixen mai en aquesta època. La meva
amiga em compra regalèssia dolça perquè
estigui tranquil·la. Suudelma és *petons*.

I és com un full tot buit, el mar glaçat.

En un començament tot el jardí era blanc.
Les passes del meu fill sobre la neu
des de la casa al mar
han romangut quan ell ja se n'ha anat.
Després hi van haver les passes d'ella,
després les passes d'ells...
Tot un murmuri de petges com paraules
que caminaven soles confonent-se

en dialectes i llengües que feien un text rar
que tampoc no deixava de ser blanc.

Les passes, en anar-me'n, hi romandran un temps.
Fins que torni a nevar.

Venint-hi, anant, potser fan un sender perquè
hi camini bé la primavera
quan li arribi el moment de la tornada.

Has après que un amic
pot salvar-te del fred.

Passes damunt la neu a Vila Kantola (Kotka, Finlàndia)

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

*or Petri Pietilainen, Merja Virolainen, Antonio Altarriba,
Paula Löflund and Esa Häinen*

If Alvar Aalto dragged that many chairs into the house
he wanted his buddies to come over.
Still, in Finland, all the houses are set
slightly apart, unless the frozen sea
brings them closer together.

Walking on the sea was possible in the end.
You just needed to blow into the North at the height of winter.

And sometimes the sea says things when you tramp on it.
Beneath-the-surface threats of breaking up and the nothing
that always comes of it. My friend
buys me licorice sticks to make me feel better.
Suudelma translates as *kisses*.

And it is like an empty page, this iced-over sea.

In the beginning the entire garden was white.
My son's footprints in the snow
from the house to the sea,
remained long after he left.
Then there were hers,
and later, theirs...
An endless whisper of prints
like words walking alone, jumbling

dialects and idioms to create a pure text,
astonishing and infinitely white.

My footprints, when I go, will stay for a while.
Or at least until the next time it snows.

Coming here, leaving, maybe they pave
a path so that spring can come
when the moment it's waiting for arrives.

Now you know a distant other
can save you from the winter.

(Translated from Catalan by Liz Hildreth, with the author)

Lyrics for Song-Like Terrain and Teisco

JARED STANLEY

The paper is damp
the yard smells of cat piss
contrasting splendors
domain it with spirit-wit
physiographic mien.

*Just lines, long, perpetual, what is reading, don't read it, read it, don't hear it,
hearing is a hatchling earshot wig-wearing, you're not not not not*

as any
which-way hummingbird
will tell you by flying off.

Put your thumb in front
of your eye, wiggle it, say,
'eh, it should go about here.'
First, we touch our acumen

listening through the whereabouts
wind whispers over chipboard, turns its stomach,
apt.

Or plywood is
strumming the drang
In the later part of the early part
Century 21
the period in which I wisht to be overhead

a livid sentence
going through and past,
it and I are ready to invest
in psychic realty.

Chapel on Riverside and 2nd

ISAAC ESCALERA

Spires pierce the firmament
Like man pierced his messiah

The chapel choir's song
Caught beneath the ceiling
Escaped through the cracks and
Bled out into the ether long ago

Now slanted rooftops
Speckled with pigeon shit
Sit atop the creaking paneling
Paint flaking like scales

Whilst vacant chapel pews
Decipher sunbeams from shadows
Through a hazy stained-glass window
Facing a Dairy Queen

Not much is sacred but
You are the most authentic thing this town has constructed

You and your ghosts

Cançó de Bressol per a la Nena Que hi Havia Dins una Velleta Que Era la Meva Mare

(Per a una antologia de cançons de bressol de Carme Riera)

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

*L'estampeta se'm perdia
no recordo l'any ni el dia*
(Salvador Espriu, Oració al senyor Sant Jordi)

*L'estampeta se'm perdia
no recordo l'any ni el dia.*

L'escaleta em remuntava
com si fos una barana.

Les ratetes escombraven,
les monedetes corrien,
el sol les enlluernava
i la lluna les delia.

Una estrella s'adormia.
Una casa s'enlairava.
Una muntanya nevada
es banyava a la piscina.

Ai que el cel em bressolava!
Ai que el riu em duia pomes
i el son el seu llit m'obria.

La pluja se'n va a fer nones,
unes campanes ressonen,
la sínia canta fluixet.

Tanquem el llibre dels homes,
obrim el llençol de dones,
i fugim com un peixet.

Lullaby to a Little Girl Living Inside an Old Woman Who Was My Mom

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

*L'estampeta se'm perdia
no recordo l'any ni el dia
(Salvador Espriu, Oració al senyor Sant Jordi)*

*The holy card was mislaid
I don't remember the year or day.*

The little ladder held me up
as if it were a banister.

Little mice swept
little coins fled
the sun dazzled them
and the greedy moon ached.

A star fell asleep.
A house took off.
A snowy mountain
bathed in the lake.

Oh, the sky was rocking me!
Oh, the river was carrying apples
and sleepiness offered its chaise.

The rain took respite,
some bells resounded,
the waterwheel sang its wish.

We close the book of men,
we open the sheet of women,
and we escape as a tiny little fish.

(Translated from Catalan by Liz Hildreth, with the author)

Ode to a Papi Chulo

MICHELLE FLORES

When I first saw you, I was like, there goes another Papi, with his tight fade and brand new Jordan's. He's probably 30, still living with his abuela in Doral, making trips to Flannigan's on "Ladies Night" so he can stick it to some sucia in the back of his Impala. But I kept watching you. Maybe it was the scars on your hands, or the crucifijo I could only catch glimpses of through your shirt. Maybe it was because in the sea of Ed Hardy and MMA t-shirts, you were the one guy wearing something with buttons. And while they toyed around with their cranberry vodka miller lite bullshit, you savored that ron and coke, licking every drop off your lips. Then you caught me staring at you. I darted my eyes away, playing with the ligas around my wrist, but you came over any way and asked if I liked la poesía. I talked about José Martí and what a bad ass he was for dying for Cuba. You smiled and told me about your construction job down by the beach, and I realized your hands were covered in the stories of the skyline you helped build. As you talked about sheet metal and air ducts, I could hear Punto Guajiro in the ritmo of your voice. When you noticed a man's name tattooed over my heart, you showed me how 305 was covering yours. I replied, "I guess we'll never forget where we came from." You whispered, "Hoy, mis cicatrices valen la pena."

Ode to a Chonga

MICHELLE FLORES

I saw you at Flannigan's, standing near the bar
 waiting for your friends,
 and I thought, Dale Mama! with your
 crunchy curly hair down
to the middle of your back, with your pursed
 lips dripping Spanglish
 to anyone who'll listen, y su uñas de acrylic
 fingering the hoop earrings your arm
could fit through. I could see the guajira
 in your eyes, the way they
 were filled with los rayos de lumbre pura
 and the divine beauty Jose Martí described.
So I went to holla at you, throwing down
 some *Versos Sencillos*
 and as we stood near the end of the bar,
 your hips dipped to the merengue
in the background. I caught you staring at my scars
 the way I stared at those perfect
 labios. As you talked about Marti, your hands moved
 like a lavadora, weaving that Santeria before
I knew what hit me. I asked about the name
 on your breast, and when you said
 it was in memory of your papá, I knew the sunrises
 spent building condos for the gringos were worth it.

Jackie & Cruz

YAZMIN WHEELOCK

They both used to live here. And then, just like that, they were both gone. Cruz was across the street from me and Jackie's family took their place next door to Cruz. We were the only ones that called her Jackie. Everyone in her family was really formal and always addressed each other in a polite way. In the evenings her mother would avoid eye contact with the rest of us as she called out to her, "Jacqueline, supper is ready." Jackie would answer, "Yes mother." She would dismiss herself, calmly walk up the tidy steps of her porch and disappear behind the big wooden door. I thought it was odd that her mother called it supper. It made me think that all they ever ate at night was soup, and because Jackie was so thin and frail-looking. I believed my theory was accurate.

Jackie's house was the nicest house on the street. The wood was worn down, but when they moved in, Jackie's father and her younger brother painted it white and trimmed it a pale baby blue. The house was humble, but prim. In the kitchen, her mother put up curtains with small flowers imprinted on them. I imagined an apple pie cooling there when her mother would open the window in attempts to let the fresh air cure the stuffy residue that never went away. Jackie talked like she was always in church, I could barely hear her. She had really thin lips that reminded me of a mouse and I imagined she ate like one too. I could see her clutching a piece of bread and quietly nibbling at it without looking up at anyone. But then I remembered that she didn't eat bread, she ate soup. So I dismissed this idea right away.

Cruz's house was the polar opposite of Jackie's. It looked like a tower of cards waiting to collapse. I thought the wind might take it away one day and that I would never see Cruz again. It had two stories, but it was so ugly and crude that it might have been better off if it was one story. You couldn't tell what color it intended to be, you could just tell that it was exhausted and

ready to retire. There was a gate that kept safe the grass-less yard of dirt and old broken toys. She had an older sister and two brothers, one of whom was married and lived there with his pregnant wife and five-year-old son. I could see the window of her bedroom from my living room and sometimes I swore she could see me—and that scared me because she could beat me up if she really wanted to. I liked to pretend sometimes that I could be as intimidating as Cruz. But I don't think I could ever hit anyone. I would probably feel so bad that I'd apologize right after and invite them to dinner—my treat. But not Cruz, she could probably beat anyone up if she really wanted to.

She had a mouth like a sailor. Worse even. This caused her mother much strife and she prayed the Rosary for her every morning. She would cry out, “¡Cruz! ¡Pára de ser tan grosera!” This was probably the worst thing she could say because it just made Cruz respond with something like, “I don't give a flying fuck, Se ora! Shit! Ass! Mother-fuck the goddamn poolice!” She would laugh even in the heat of her mother's enraged eyes as she came at her with her father's belt; which was the worst thing Cruz could do because then her mother would tell her, “*Vas a ver, cabrona. Vas a ver. Nomás que llegue tu papa.*” You know something bad was going to happen when your mother speaks to you in a calm and steady tone like that; it makes you uneasy, like a cat, as you wait for your father to get home and the real discipline begins.

Everything about Cruz was old. She was the oldest one of us three (and even then looked much older than she really was), she lived in an old house, she wore old clothes, had old shoes, and she had a name that I've only known old Mexican *abuelas* to have. She listened to music that was all by artists that were either dead or on their way there. She would always quote them at the strangest times. One time she got in an argument with her family (which happened often, but her whole family was so loud all the time sometimes you couldn't tell if they were fighting or talking about how their day was) and all I remember is waking up in the middle of the night to the sound of her father cursing at her in Spanish. I could hear her struggling and then she shouted back to him, “Well, I don't fucken care 'cause London is drowning and I live by the goddamn river!” The next thing I heard was a door slamming and footsteps running away from the house and shortly after, the sound of a car peeling out with a screech so loud that the people across town could probably hear it. My mother would use instances like these as

examples of why I should count my blessings. “Be thankful you don’t have a family like that Cruz,” she would say. “You have something to look forward to. Not like *esa muchacha*. Came from nothing only to go to another nothing. No wonder she’s the way she is . . . You should keep your distance.”

The days after nights like these were the only times the boisterous Cruz was no longer boisterous, but solemn. She didn’t laugh at things with her explosive laughter or tell the neighborhood boys to go fuck themselves when they would try to hit on her. No,

these days her looks were enough to keep people at a distance. These days she’d sit outside with her *abuelito*’s old record player and play records by Vicente Fernández and Rocío Dúrcal and Jorge Negrete. We’d go up to the gate and ask her if she was okay and she would say, “Hold on, this is my favorite part.” She’d close her eyes to the musky song and looked like she was imagining herself singing it in a huge arena where people throw roses onto the stage and give standing ovations. She still cursed like a sailor, though. “I’m gonna get the fuck out of here,” she would say, “Doesn’t matter where, just the hell away from here. *Al infierno con este* piece of shit barrio.” And I believed her.

The first time we hung out with Jackie was a week after she moved in. “Look at that *gringa*,” Cruz said. “She probably thinks she’s the shit around here, like she’s better than the rest of us. She probably expects us to do her yard or kill chickens on our front lawns or something, ya know? What the fuck is she doing moving here anyway?” I just nodded without thinking too much into it. I mean, in a sense she was right. The only times we ever saw people that looked like Jackie was when they would come to volunteer for some non-profit organization to “clean the streets up and make the world a better place.” Yup, we lived in that neighborhood you see on TV, the one where you see all the teens laughing and painting rainbows on the wall for a better tomorrow. Only nothing much ever changed so I never really understood why they pretended to care in the first place.

“Let’s go say hi and see if she wants to be our friend,” she concluded.

“Okay.”

Jackie looked bored, as if she sat outside to see if it was any different from sitting inside; but it wasn’t very different other than outside she met us. She had a really pretty ribbon in her hair, though.

“Hey, you! What’s your name?” Cruz yelled, leaning on the mailbox. Jackie looked up, dumbfounded. “What? Did you think I couldn’t speak English, Güera? What’s your name?”

Jackie looked like she forgot her own name and finally said, “Um, I’m Jacqueline.”

“Well, shit! That wasn’t too hard, was it?” Cruz said smiling.

I don’t know how Cruz got away with talking to people like that. I guess it’s the humor of how she said things that made people sense that she didn’t really mean to insult, but couldn’t find a better ice breaker other than using four letter words. Her boyfriend loved that about her. People would ask him *what kind of young lady talks like that?* And he would gladly answer, “My lady.” And everyone would laugh. The only people that ever got offended were Cruz’s mother and the nuns at church who made the sign of the cross when they walked by her. But then again, maybe people were too scared to say anything to her, or figured it wouldn’t make a difference anyway. I don’t know. I never figured it out.

Jackie smiled back and we both introduced ourselves to her. Cruz told her we were gonna take a walk and asked if she wanted to come with us. Jackie was enthused.

“I just have to ask my father if it’s okay.”

He was skeptical, peering through the screen door. Cruz smiled and waved at him, knowing that he didn’t realize she could see him.

“We’ll take good proper care of your daughter, sir. Won’t let any hooligans mess with her or anything.” She grinned again and although he still looked uneasy about the whole thing, he agreed to let Jackie join us.

We showed Jackie around the neighborhood, told her the alleys she should avoid and even all of the good short cuts to get home faster, before your parents found out you were up to no good. Cruz would tell her how it was before she moved in.

“You think this is bad, Jackie? It was a shit-ton worse before you moved in. There were gang wars here, and drive-bys too. Oh and you couldn’t go down the street for *pan dulce* at the *panadería* without someone threatening to cut you like a fucken goat. Ghetto as fuck, I tell you.”

Jackie looked terrified and said things like *oh, my goodness!* And *that’s awful!* And then Cruz laughed and patted Jackie hard on the shoulder, “Calm

down Güera! I'm just messing with you!" There was a silence and Jackie looked over to me to see if it was true. I nodded.

"Oh," Jackie said and we both joined in the laughter.

"But seriously, though," Cruz added, "Don't go through that alley."

With our help, Jackie was able to adjust to her new home. She had taken a liking to Menudo on Sundays. My mother would make it and send me over with Cruz to Jackie's house with a plastic bowl covered in aluminum foil to share. She loved that an American could take a liking to things we thought were ordinary; and I kind of liked it too. It felt like we were more alike than different. These kinds of little miracles always seemed to happen over home-cooked meals. Jackie's father, though, didn't care for it. You could tell the smell bothered him when we would be sitting in the living room waiting for Jackie to come down. Me with the big bowl of soup and Jackie with the zip-lock baggies of cabbage, onion, oregano and radishes. Jackie's father would hold his breath and try to make small talk while Cruz and I smiled and pretended like we weren't examining the house to later compare it to our own. It was a relief for all involved when we finally heard Jackie's steps coming toward us a couple minutes later.

Oddly enough, once we completed our friendship trinity, Cruz wasn't around so much anymore. She had always worked odd jobs here and there, but I guess now she had to get a more consistent job to help her family.

"It's fucking bullshit." She said. "My ma says that it's about time I really help out the family. She said I'm not doing shit at school and I'm not doing shit at home so I better start doing something instead of being a *sangana* who only takes and takes and takes."

"Why are you doing so bad in school, Cruz?"

"Because it doesn't make a goddamn difference if I am the next Albert Einstein or if I have shit for brains. I'm not going anywhere. I'll be working shit jobs for the rest of my life."

I was scared to ask, but I did anyway. "Why?"

"What's with all the fucking questions? Goddammit! I can't do shit with my life because we're all drenched in water here, do you hear me? Fresh from *el pinche rio!* And there's nothing that I can do about it, alright?"

I think I knew what she meant by the river, but I didn't want to ask to confirm; 'cause if Cruz is drenched in water, then I will be too if I ask her any

more questions.

“We’re only here temporarily,” Jackie said as she ate into her popsicle. She took a liking to the *paletería Michoacána* on 5th and Rockvale. “My father’s company isn’t doing very well right now, so he told us we would move here until things got back on track and we could find somewhere else to live. I’m surprised they were okay with moving in here, but they’re so insistent on it being for only a short time that my parents told us that we didn’t need to unpack everything. My father really doesn’t like it here. And don’t tell Cruz, but he really doesn’t care for her dad. I think the only reason why he lets me see you guys is because my mother keeps reminding him that it’s going to be short lived.”

“Oh,” I said and bit into my own *paleta*, careful to not let it drip on the black asphalt. To be honest, I never really liked Jackie’s dad and I often wondered if one day she was going to get tired of hanging out with us since we weren’t really up to her family’s standards. But this was the day I knew Jackie was just like us.

“Was your old house nice?”

“No, not really. But my family likes to pretend like it was. I don’t know why, it never bothered me. They care, though. It’s why we have to move around so much, I think. My mother and father spend a lot on expensive things we don’t need so that at least we could give the illusion that the nice car comes with a nice house too. They’re all about aesthetics. In the evenings, my mother used to sit with my brother and me to give us lessons on proper etiquette so that people could look at us with admiration. But I always found it suffocating, and my mother’s knowledge on it was limited. I wish I could just tell people to F off like Cruz does.”

A piece of her *paleta* fell on the ground. Her eyes followed it as it tumbled to the ground, disappointed at the chunk of frozen strawberry she’ll never get to eat. But still, she gave a sigh of relief, grateful that it landed on the asphalt and not on her dress.

I laughed and said, “I don’t think I could ever see you saying a single curse word in your life, Jackie. And since you know all about the elite, why do they have so many forks for each person when they eat?” And then Jackie said something I never thought would come out of her mouth: “Hell if I know.”

I was so shocked, I made the sign of the cross.

Anyway, like I said, they both used to live here. And then, just like that, they were both gone.

Cruz came up to us on her day off and said, “Tonight I’m sneaking out. I’m going to the club downtown and I’m gonna get fucken plastered on L.A. Waters and Long Island Iced Teas, and I’m gonna dance in the cages to the sweet sound of the 80’s and I don’t give a damn if I get caught for this shit. I’m doing it... You guys wanna come with me?”

Jackie and I looked at each other with skepticism. Cruz had gotten away with not getting carded for a long time now and it seemed she had taken full advantage of this lately. But we both knew that it was something we couldn’t get away with ourselves. Not with the bouncers and much less with our parents. This was a life-sentence we were looking at. But the good thing was that when we wouldn’t go along with what Cruz suggested, she’d just say something like, *Well fuck you guys* and get over it by the next day. So we said no, she cussed us out, and left.

The club she was talking about was this run-down building someone made into a club that played *reggaetón* most nights and once a week played something different. Sometimes it was hip-hop, sometimes it was the latest pop songs and sometimes they had an 80’s night. She showed us her outfit and it was obvious that she got it all from a compilation of heavy-duty thrift store bargain shopping. She said she had been saving up for a while so that she could go this one night. I could already imagine her, intoxicated, swaying her head to the sound of the words: *There is a light and it never goes out, There is a light and it never goes out.*

Her boyfriend picked her up down the street that night. He was good-looking and the reason why Cruz would sometimes work extra shifts. He was also the reason she’d left work early without her mother knowing that they worked at the same place. I think the reason why she did what she did for him was because she thought he was the one that was finally going to get her out of this place to wherever anywhere is.

“If it doesn’t work out, then it doesn’t work out,” she would say, acting like she didn’t care one bit about him, “I think it will though.”

But that was the last time we saw Cruz. Turns out, her boyfriend had one too many, (from the sound of it, he had five too many) and lost control of the

car. Knowing Cruz, she probably had the whole night planned out; and like most things she plans out, it will fall apart in the end. Cruz will announce that she was calling it a night early that night. “I’m fucking exhausted,” she will say. And they will believe her. She will get dressed in the dark and hold a flash light under her sheets to do her make-up. This will give her enough time to give the illusion that she has been asleep for a while. Then, when the sound of her family has settled down, she will slowly climb out of her window, shoes in her hand and money in her bosom. She’ll be cautious to not alert the neighborhood dogs and get in the car. After the night of drinking and dancing and forgetting about the life she really has, Cruz will believe him when he says he’s okay to drive. Makeup smeared, shoes off again, and sweaty from the night of fun, she will sing, “*Driving in your car, oh please don’t drop me home because it’s not my home, it’s their home and I’m welcome no more.*” They will both laugh and sing off key. He will make a left turn and the car will never stop spinning for them.

Neither of them survived, and when the day of the funeral came, her casket was closed. Her family found out the next day and it seemed as though their dilapidated roof finally caved in on them. Her father began to drink excessively and the rest of the family was too afraid of what he might do to tell him anything about it. I would see him outside playing her old records. Only he wasn’t quiet like she was when she did this, he was loud. I couldn’t study because all I could hear was a mumbling mixture of Cruz’s dad and Chente singing: *No puedo terminar con tantas penas, Quisiera rebentarme hasta las venas, Por tu maldito amor, por tu maldito amor... ¡Y ya para que quiero la tumba, si ya me enterraste en vida!* And the tears would pour down just as fast as he poured the liquor of his flask into his mouth. The neighbors began to talk and he didn’t care.

“Fah-kk jur mah-derr, eh-stoo-peh mans!” he shouted at Jackie’s father when he tried to confront him. And then he would laugh and laugh and laugh. I realized then, that Cruz got her laugh from her father.

And then, just like that, they were gone. All of them. Jackie told me things were looking up at her father’s work and so they were going to be moving.

“He told me the new house is much nicer than this one. But I don’t think so. It’s probably just like this one. I wish I didn’t have to leave, I like it here.

I'll write to you. Even if it gets me in trouble.”

“Why would you get in trouble for that?”

“Because, my parents- they said this was only temporary. I'm so sorry. Here, take this before my mother sees me.” She placed the ribbon from the first day we met her in my hand and with that, she dismissed herself and then Jackie, well, she disappeared.

Strangely enough though, the next day, as Cruz's father was reaching the third movement in his aria of drunkenness, the cops show up. Nobody in the neighborhood ever called the police. They all talked among themselves, but they would look the other way when passing him. I think this was their way of paying their respects to the grieving father. But the day Jackie moved out, they showed up and took Cruz's father away; for drinking in public, I guess. By then, the shame was too much to bear for Cruz's mother because next thing I know, Cruz's house was empty. Not long after they took Cruz's father away, there was a big U-Haul out in front of their yard. I saw them packing away furniture that could match no house other than the one they were removing it from. Piece by piece they packed it all away and left in silence.

I never got a letter from Jackie. I didn't know where her new house was so I couldn't write to her either. I never ran into any of Cruz's family around town either. One night, I looked out the window when I went to get a glass of water, and I could have sworn I saw Cruz there in her room with Jackie. She saw me and flipped me off and burst into laughter while Jackie tried to quiet her down. I smiled and touched Jackie's ribbon in my hair. Then I took my water and poured it over my head.

“See, Cruz? Now we're all drenched.”

I still think about both of them all the time. I don't tell anybody about it, though. Don't really see the point. All I know is that they both used to live here, and when they left, I watched it all happen through my living room window.

Signs

MARIA DEPETRIS OF CÓRDOBA

Routes to come... and go
Under an imperfect triangle
there is a small city
with a grand park.
The children wonder after toy cars,
small bumpers
(many learned to drive there).
I tried to bind the head
of the duck to gain a bear.
In this place, the market is today
and it is grand.
In the imperfect tense, there are no children,
no more games.
They run to capture the minutes, others
for spare change. Me,
I drive.
The city stays,
small.

(Translated from Spanish by Paula Wright)

Guajira Trapped in the States

MICHELLE FLORES

She leaves El Oriente because
Mami says life will be better this way.
So at seventeen,
in a new country farther north than
she's ever imagined, she sews. She
can make everything she could never
afford to buy.

Hazel eyes are quickly masked by purple moons.
Hands that once swam through lakes now hem skirts.
Lips that once kissed guayabas now grip hat pins.
Feet that once climbed mountains now tap a pedal.

Years go by. While Brooklyn stiffens
her joints, Miami calls.

As the seasons give way to the land
where the trees don't sleep, her
hands remember what her mind
forgot: Guajira, with some eggshells
and carrot shavings, makes the
mangoes healthy once more. Where
she steps, orchids rise, growing
because she gave them breath.

Yet still, Miami is not home.

Guajira reads her Biblia outside as
the sun goes down. She drifts to
sleep and dreams
of her Cuba, y su finca, y su
cascada.

Arcelia Vegat

MICHELLE FLORES

Born in Andalusia, she immigrated to Cuba with her parents when she was seven years old, three decades before the Revolution. She grew up in El Oriente with the Guajiros. Under the full moon and near waterfalls, she learned the secrets of healing: how to feel Africa with every step she took, how her voice could be used to call on the Orishas, why blood was the only gift that really got things done. People came from all over Cuba, carrying chickens and goats over mountains to reach her. One day, the town doctor died. It mourned their only learned man's passing. For all her knowledge of life, Arcelia would never fully stop death. That night, santeros beat their drums, spices and smoke filling the air as Arcelia stared dry-eyed into the clouds covering the moon. While at the burial, she turned from the crowd, walking towards the rotting tombstones in the deepest recesses of the cemetery. Slowly, she lifted the stones out of their resting places, piling each one on the other. When she built her mountain, she climbed to the top and fell asleep. Santeros, in their white linen garb, surrounded her. Their tiny red beads swayed against their chests as they prayed to Oya, keeper of the cemetery, giving her eggplant, goat, and black horsehair. At midnight, Arcelia awoke, leaving the santeros to their worship. She walked back to her farm and gazed at the waterfall of her ten daughters. She prayed to Yemaya, goddess of the sea. As her daughters fell asleep beneath the stars, she stepped towards the cascade and filled her hands with water. She walked to the house, to her husband and three sons, hands cupped so tightly the water could not escape. Death would not touch them that night.

In Pierces

(“The exotic may not be true, but it is certainly a relief...”)

JARED STANLEY

On G Street
under the plucked pomegranates
to make a dry sound is best

if there are no men around
to walk like death to work
on the balls of their feet,
on the tips of their lonesome werewolf feelings
on the “can’t feel” of their endemic faces.

Not pierced or impressed by tongues
I’m a watching creature
my habitat the entropic demand
of the Real: the lesser jewels,
agate/turquoise/zirconia,
the decorative
tail of a Chinese Spaniel
hachiya-orange in bare trees,

a raccoon’s corpse changed
to coyote’s muscle, to ant’s blood,

so utterly pierced by the aching
slowness of quest, of years—
a single tongue rinses the inside of my mouth

with calligraphic gamelan bells
I eat drunk waxwings whole
their plain decorous effusion,
the bells, the knells,
the hollow green yells,
they carom off the heart like fat.
The year came alive and wet

so a dry soul is best
under the plucked pomegranates
of G Street.

Jaybird

JARED STANLEY

Pale with a tree in front of it
Moon's lock of light
Hover from behind a ridge
Comely pockmarks, sea called clouds
It dims stars
Even the pen fills with water at its touch
The world is granite
Punctuated by junipers
Even such mountains can't huddle it out of sight
And then gone
leaves flit, turn to storm
Moon gone
Tarps and needles wet
Late black snowbank: wet
Why did you stop talking, jaybird?
Split the hairlike feathers
Spirited wing I follow
My friend asks if I still exist
I say yes
Empirical reverie
That's where I come from
Sea of Cold

orange (naranja)

JULIETTA BARANTES OF CÓRDOBA, ARGENTINA

a moment ago, it was orange,
and the sky grew dark, too.
we came in the house and shut the windows,
all but one, its face turned to street and sky.
we anticipate, and that's natural, too,
to see what happens in all the rain and after
the clouds orange.
the strong sun of afternoon still giving light
and casting shadows on trees close by—

the storm went still, and now everything is singing—
cicadas, crickets, frogs, the wind, my voice.

(Translated from Spanish by Paula Wright)

Noisy Brown Noise

JARED STANLEY

Panthers strum green
guitar strings along

the wintry marsh all
gray-green with frogs

They're here I swear
I saw them, one time

It's been seventy or so
hours of fog between

the mountains and valleys
gray-green with panthers

strumming wintry frogs
yelling "moon moon moon"

trying to call it out of itself
like an orphaned gift;

some shadow of the reader
falls about the page.

God From a Place Unknown

ERIK BERG

Day is no clay du bois,
But for boys to be what
They aren't,
For girls to be what
They are not.

A night's built fine
In seed and womb,
So left the mind to loom
Our webbing cot
Of dreams and seams
Of which we are,
And of which we are not.

Steady shades,
Insufficient in definitions;
Subordinate in the eyes
Of what they see,
A tomb,
A cocoon,
A growth in the machine
Of we,
A blossom in the mud of plot
And scheme.
Appearing earthly civil
Outright:
Fertile, social, lovely

In day's light.

“Assume through
Growth of contrite eyes,
That life is a coming place,
And wrongfully right.”

Dark is so kind, true,
And real man's light.

And day is no clay du bois,
But for boys to be what
They are,
For women to be what
They are not.

Santiago and the Canyon

ERIK BERG

It's hard to say where all of it got started, or if anybody truly believed that Santiago would do something as crazy as it really was, but it makes for a good story, and it's possible something moral could come from it, being that I do my job right, and put things in their proper place.

Let's first, then, start with Santiago. There's not much I could say about Santiago without letting it first be known that the man was crazy, and stubborn as hell. From what I remember, he was a short, stout little man with a crooked nose, and an over anxious appetite for the dramatic. Before the war and the bad luck, each of us had a good place to be in the countryside. There wasn't much worry, and people laughed a good deal then. There was little work to do outside of what was normal, and the men spent a lot of nights in town and when they came back they were always drunk, and they always had stories of Santiago and his antics. I remember distinctly that the little fat man hung himself from the strung lights of the plaza like a circus man, and they say he fell like a bear on the way down. Once he climbed the balcony of the hacienda and spent some time in the care of Maria, as she was a nice woman and the only one willing to put up with him for the time it took to care for him. And if it wouldn't drag on, then I would tell you of the time he slept in the bull's pen, or of the time he wrestled with the great armadillo, but these will be stories for another time, and for the moment, I'll get back to where I was going with it.

My first memory of the man came the night of the fiesta of the bulls outside the casa of my father's brother, Raphael. The fiesta was to celebrate the beginning of the bull season, and of the games, and everybody was together beneath the yellow and green lanterns, and there was music and good food through the evening. That night I was waiting in curiosity to see the man of the stories. Between us children, we all had images of a great

man, a big strong, bull of a man riding through the countryside on a heavy horse. But Santiago didn't make his appearance until late, and when he did, as children often are, we were very wrong.

The men began laughing hysterically, and then we all began to run to see the source of their laughter. The ranch of Raphael was one of the wealthier, and he had spent it mostly on the building of canals and reservoirs to keep it wet. Santiago had slipped through the party, and was perched on top of a hill a running distance away from the bank of one of the wider canals.

—Va a saltarlo! one of the men shouted. He's going to jump!

And they all began to chant, the way drunken men chant.

Santiago did not budge, or pay any attention to the growing crowd, though he was very sure it was there. He was sitting on the back of a low looking ass, brown with the mud of a work animal, with gray ears that stuck high in the air, and it looked just as slovenly yet prideful as Santiago did at the moment. The two made a good pair.

Once he was sure all eyes were watching, he gave a kick into the mule's side, and the two went fumbling down the hill toward the canal.

—Es un idiota! Que va a morir! my mother was saying. He'll kill himself!

She would have been right if it weren't for the rains a day before, and the good luck of Santiago that the canal should be full and running high with brown water. When the mule hit the bank, the two tumbled with the grace of a fat man and an ass into the water, and the men, drunk as they were, had to rescue the helpless two, as neither of them could swim to save their own lives.

Before they had dried, Santiago hopped with difficulty onto the back of the poor mule, and like idiots, the two rode off into the sunset, wet and full with pride.

And that was the first encounter I had with Santiago, and I feel it sums up his character very well. Now I can move on, and let you know of other things, like when the bad luck came.

I'm not sure what caused it, but even before the war, people were beginning to get anxious and to leave. There were always rumors the valley would go dry soon, and nothing good could come of dry land, but it was really all the good news going on up north that drove them out. Many people were moving north past the border, and every time they did, there would come

back letters urging us all to join them. My father would laugh at these letters and toss them aside. It was his great grandfather who had started the ranch in the same valley, and it was his grandfather's duty, and his father's, and his own to keep it going strong. Most of the ranches had the same custom. It was the way things were. When my grandmother left up north, he laughed it off, but it hurt him bad, and I don't think he ever recovered.

She sent me letters often telling me how the hills were higher, and the oak trees were green and the ground was a nice brown of life. She wrote them in English and I was the only one of us who could read them, because she had always made it a duty to teach me the language. I don't think she had ever wanted to stay. She had always told me she wanted to go north, but only me, and when she did go, it was a big surprise. Then she began sending letters to my mother, asking if we could stay up north with her, only for a little while, but nobody ever came back when they left. My father would tear the letters and kick them into the dirt.

—Things aren't good for us up there, he'd say. We wouldn't work. No nos quieren. They don't want us.

For a while after the people began leaving, things stayed good. The ranches kept green, and the rains came still, and the canals were full. All of us were fed and laughing. I don't know if the ranches made us ignorant people to what was happening beyond the hills, or if we just hadn't learned to see the signs, but there were bad omens that we missed, and I think the biggest one was the most obvious: the coming of the war.

It was patriotic to fight then, even though none of us on the ranch had any experience fighting outside of land disputes. And once the men came into town wearing the colors and the uniforms, all the boys were quick to go, and if I had been old enough I would have gone just like them. But I could not go.

One day a truck came to the ranch bearing the colors, and there was music and crying followed by cheering and honorable handshakes of men. And like animals, my brothers were led onto the overcrowded truck alongside many other brothers. They gave one last shake to my father who was proud as any man at that moment, and then they gave one last look to my mother while she cried with just the same pride. And the truck began down the road with all its music and its colors, and I saw only one of those brothers again,

and he wasn't mine, but I loved him all the same.

The valley was quiet without the boys, but those of us who stayed only worked harder and things carried on very well. A man in a jeep would come every week and give news on the war, and we were always doing well, even when the bad news came. But even the bad news did not discourage the valley. It was when the good news came that things grew bad. One day the war was over, and when the jeep came, it came as it always had, and left as it always had. I overheard my father and the man on the porch before he drove away.

—*Quien gano?* my father asked. Who won?

And the man began laughing in a way that I think surprised himself just as much as it did my father because he left with a very solemn look, and he was very pale as he drove away.

That was the end of my father, and many others, and all that pride they had when the trucks came was never seen again. It might have been coincidence, or maybe something of the earth had tasted the mood, but once the sadness of the men came, so did the droughts, and the valley became dry and stale with yellow dirt. No matter how hard we worked, nothing would grow, and soon the horses became thin, and the bulls became thin, and people laughed very little.

Many letters came from my grandmother, and each one was sent back with lies of how things were still good and we were getting along fine. But I think she knew. Anyone could see the sadness in the ink of my father, and no one better than his own mother. But he threw the letters aside in much the same way.

—*No tenemos un lugar*, he would say. We do not belong. Here it is not good, but we belong.

I wrote back my grandmother many times and told her the things my father would say. She would never deny them, but her sentences were crisp when she talked of it, and she always noted that things were changing. She could feel it. Everyone could feel it up there, and things were going to be good for everybody.

In time, the hills became a golden color from the sun, and the canals became white with a lack of water, and all our hands became worked and callused but with no return. Some days my father did not ride into the fields

to even try, and he would sit in the darkness of the house alone, and after awhile he became used to the solitude, and he drank the time in the worst place it could go—away. We did not wear shoes that summer, and it was from that time that my feet grew hard and strong, and still ache in places to this day. We went hungry in the nights, and ate in the afternoons so that we could work in comfort, and when we worked enough to feed maybe one, my mother worked her magic in the kitchen, and we ate for all the best we could. We managed to keep the ranch functional, and to live, and for that, we were very lucky.

Many of the ranches could not live. The land at the lower portion of the valley could not sustain the times, and there were no choices given but to sell. Families loaded a truck with the possessions they could, said their goodbyes to places they had known since children, and drove off with nothing and nowhere to go. As children, we stood by the dirt road and watched the trucks kick dust in the white air, and we saw no sadder faces than the dead men who drove away. Eventually they settled in the city just south of the valley, wherever they could find work, and they started over the best they could, but as different, prideless people.

There was always a look of dread in my father's eyes, and I knew when he watched the wind kick the dust through the dead leaves, that he saw himself becoming one of the prideless people, and it frightened him. It frightened everybody the same, and when we came together there was no laughter or talking, but the men only sat together beneath the shade of the light trees, staring off into the distance, in wait of what was to come, like old, done-for men. That kind of disease was infectious; the disease of lost hope and grief.

And this is the point of the story where Santiago and our lives intertwined. This is where Santiago becomes important.

All the bad times and the sorrow had changed more than the landscape of the valley, and we were all different people, hardened and stiff phantoms of what we had been. Every time I looked down at my hands I could see the change very clearly; they had hardened from the work, and so had my legs, and my arms, and my wits together. This was a time when many of the men who had been so steady and strong grew old. This was the time when my mother's hair went from black to gray, and my father walked with a slight fault to his step, though without ever hurting a leg.

But the bad times seemed to miss Santiago altogether. There was no change in the little stout man. He and the brown ass beneath him rode as they always had, with a drunken holler. He never lost his desire for the dramatic, and after the incident with the canals, he became obsessed with the grandeur of the jump. I heard stories of him jumping the roof of the ayuntamiento, and how the ass slipped on a shingle and they fell the two stories straight to the 'dobe floor. Then there was another where he drove the ass in a hard charge to clear a row of thistles, and a hoof caught something hard and the two tumbled like idiots into the rows.

—Es loco, they'd say. He's crazed. Won't give up.

And he wouldn't give up either. While we worked hard in the dry fields, Santiago jumped the barrera during a corrida and landed feet away from the bull. Somehow, he and the mule fought their way free of a goring, while one of the rescuers took a horn sharp to the side, but that was the luck of Santiago. He was a very lucky man. In his next jump he slammed hard against the side of the casa of Raphael and broke four bones, and nine in the mule. The two spent some time with Maria, but once they healed, they jumped again and broke three more a piece. They jumped the break between the plaza, and they jumped the gap between the great windmill and the stockyard, and when they failed at that, they jumped the great windmill. Anywhere there was a space to be jumped, you were sure to see the little fat man barreling down on that brown mule, and you were just as sure to see them fall, and just as sure to see them get hurt.

When things were bad in the valley it was always a pleasure to hear the stories of Santiago and his mishaps. It was one of the few means for us to laugh, and when we laughed, to keep laughing, and things could be as they were in the valley. And hearing the stories kept things pleasant for a time, but then even those went away.

After his incident with the great windmill there was nothing to be seen of Santiago. He was not seen in the cantinas, or the roads, and people began to watch the normal places, but they heard nothing of him or the brown mule, and things were very quiet once more. This was a time when things were at their worst.

There were times when my father considered selling the ranch was the only way, and you knew this by the times when he did not come home, and

when he did, he'd smell drunk from a mile down the road, and he wouldn't speak, but be still and sulk. Even at times I felt my mother had given up hope. She would sit in the cocina alone and hold the cross at her neck and pray. She never believed in asking God for anything, and I could see that it made her feel cheap, and she cried often when she thought we weren't looking, or couldn't hear.

My grandmother wrote the most in these times. My father did not read them anymore, and he set them aside for me to go through. Every time before I read them, my father would tell me to sit across from him and he'd tell me the time when his brother Raphael had gone north, and the stories were always the same.

—Va a preguntarlo! he'd say. Go ask him! Talk to him.

And I did talk to him.

One day I came up to him as he rested against the posts of the bulls, and I asked him everything my father had to ask. He only shook his head and his eyes kept steady on the bulls, and after awhile he looked down and patted my head as if I were still very young.

—Es el gente, he said. It's the people. Sometimes they can be so cruel.

Many people had given up hope. Every month there was a new car coming down the way and all their lives were gone from the valley like the water. Those of us left were only the tumbleweeds showing that life once had a presence after all. When the families left, they sold out to men who couldn't plant, and only bought the land because they had the money in the first place. The valley became ugly, and the ugliness seemed to spring down onto those of us remaining, and we became ugly with it.

We began to grow lazy with the lack of hope, and it felt like a curtain drawing the light from our eyes, and I believe if it weren't for Santiago then we would have stayed that way until we were all sucked up dry like the land and died with it. But then one day Santiago was spotted, and everything changed; he was going to jump the canyon.

I'm not sure who it was I can credit with spotting Santiago first, but it would be too hard to say because the news spread quick and soon everybody knew, and soon, everybody was excited again.

—He's going to jump the canyon! The news came.

Maria had seen him on the brown grass, and she described the scene as

she would seeing an angel, and she did so with just as much pride.

—It has to be a hundred feet deep! she said.

And the next time it was two hundred, and then three, and by the time it came to my mother and father it was a good thousand miles deep and the canyon was a good three hundred miles wide. Though we all knew the correct measurements, none of us corrected her.

In the midday sun, we dropped our things, and everybody hurried to catch sight of Santiago and his next act. I could see the canyon bend purple and dark against the white sand and then I could see the shadow of the hills behind us, and then as we came close to where the crowd had gathered some distance away, I could see the little form of Santiago perched atop the mule. The two stood close to the bank, enough to where they could look down at the good hundred feet to the bottom, and all the stone and the cool air from the shade, but they looked ahead, at the other side, in a devout, almost pious way. The sun shone from the brown skin of the fat man's neck, and we all watched and cheered and expected at any moment for there to be a kick at the mule's side and then a charge, but it never came. The two were steady.

We waited till the evening but the kick never came. Santiago only once acknowledged the crowd, by a look and a spit to the white ground, and every moment else he was in concentration like a true professional. His shadow crept over the canyon wall and all of our shadows soon disappeared when the sun went behind the hills. Santiago and the mule were still at the bank when we began back to the valley. There was no disappointment in the afternoon.

—Manana, I heard a man say. Tomorrow, he's going to do it.

And that was infectious.

The next day was filled with angst, and work was done very quickly, and when all got back to the canyon, Santiago and that brown mule were waiting for us as if they had stayed pious through the night and the cold. He did not acknowledge our coming, but looked forward in preparation. That day he did not jump either, but with the same result, and we went back to the valley in wait for tomorrow.

Every day after, the work was done before noon, and the free time was spent at the canyon. Soon the women would come prepared and cook for the special occasion and some of the men would play music, and soon enough there were red and green lanterns sprung about the white sand and things

became festive and alive. But still Santiago did not jump.

—Puede hacerlo, they'd say. He can make it.

And no more families were seen going up the road, and no more buyers were seen in that time. It was more luck than anything else, but somehow the events were contributed to Santiago and his inspiration. People worked harder because the little fat man could jump a canyon, and if he could, they could raise a dead land, and nobody could tell them otherwise.

But Santiago did not jump. Every afternoon, the canyon drew a crowd, and Santiago and the ass took their pulpit on the banks, but they made no intentions on jumping. He never kicked the side, or made a charge, or readied in any way. They stood stone still as statues, in concentration and thought, I suppose. But still the crowd watched in anticipation, like the down moments in the corridas where the bull is calm, waiting for it to charge, and they knew it would be at any moment.

I watched Santiago very closely for the first time then. His body was stout and ordinary, but his face was strong and his eyes were something more. The ass kept steady beneath the weight, and the times they circled the white sand and took position once more, I could make out the old scars from the previous failures.

I did not believe he was going to jump.

In the mornings, there would be new stories of Santiago. They would tell about the time Santiago cleared the hacienda, or when he nearly fell short of making the plaza, but kicked in one last moment and came through. The stories changed so much that people truly believed he could make the canyon. If he could do the others, he could make the canyon with ease. And more people came to watch him do the feat, but he never did jump.

There was a night when I became very curious of Santiago. While the others slept, I went to the canyon alone. The purple bend of the canyon was a black line, and the white sand kicked very cold beneath my feet, but I managed to find him. He was there where he never left, he and the ass, as still as they were in the afternoon. I crept behind the dead brush and watched without letting myself be known. The night was very solemn that night, and I listened but could hear nothing but the deep breaths of the mule, and when things became monotonous, that was when Santiago gave a turn to the mule, and they rode off opposite the canyon.

The next afternoon he did not come to the canyon. In his place were the square tracks of a mule in the white sand and nothing more. We waited, and when he didn't show, a group of the men scoured the canyon for a trace of him below, but they found nothing and when they came up they said he must have cleared the jump because he wasn't at the bottom.

And that was the last I heard of Santiago. We gathered our things, and for the next few afternoons, showed up to the canyon just to see. But after some time, things went back as they were, and the stories faded, and we all forgot just as quickly as we had remembered.

My father asked of him once when I could hear him speaking with Raphael, and he sounded very solemn, the way a man does before crying.

—Es triste, he said. It's sad. I never got to thank him.

And Raphael nodded, because he felt much the same way. Many of them did.

One day the sky was not blue. It had been so for so long that when we saw the purple mounds above the hillside we were suspicious and it took time to learn to shout, and by the time we did, the rains came strong and we cheered while it poured over our heads. Life has a good forgiveness. The hills did not take long to become green once more, and the sprouts in the field rejoiced in the change of circumstance, and there was life once more.

My grandmother wrote very little in this time, but the letters she did write I remember very well, because they make me think of Santiago. She wrote much about the great oak trees, and the beautiful brown hills, and of a place where things could be in no better place. And when I grew old, I traveled north when there was time to spare, and things to see, and I saw the great oak trees, and the beautiful brown hills, but I also saw the things my father had spoken of.

When I saw with my grandmother, she was very old and gray, and she took me by the hands and she guided me into the small home where she lived on the outskirts of the northern valley of the letters.

She put her voice close to my ears and spoke in the voice of her ink,

—Ahora la ves! she said. Now you see it! Why are you not happy?

—Because of the people. Because of what they do.

—Things will change. Things are changing. There are men right now working on it.

And I did not argue, but let her be as she was because when people believe in something you cannot tell them otherwise, as was my experience in the matter.

I could have told her of Santiago, of what I told you, because here is where it all matters, but I kept it to myself. I went back south only after I saw the things my father spoke of, and I saw them often and I felt them, and I felt the canyon between the people. And through that time spent north, I can draw one conclusion to this day. The men my grandmother spoke of remind me very much of Santiago. Those men are standing still, pious at the banks, yet I don't think they have any intention of jumping.

The Hole in My Stomach

ASHLEY N. HAYES

I.

Your shoes always
so tall, so soft—
so very plastic—
I used to smell you
on a warm day—
the breast milk
of my sweat,
the sugariness
of day old hair,
the thick malty breath
of humidity—your
eyes—I saw them
in the grocery store,
between detergents—
Windex blue—
transparent as
they pierced me
like yours did
before the haze
clouded like cotton.
It's best if we all
pretend you're dead.

I've been cutting
shapes—hearts,

zig-zags—my babies
glue them together,
“Valentines” in August—
you saved mine,
I’m sure—rats ate
them by now—
Thursday/Margarita
Night was my favorite—
you’d open your core,
abandon each arm,
float and swallow
the music—laugh
through soggy teeth—
I saw you kiss him—
you said friends kiss
with open mouths—
like leprechauns,
Santa, Jesus’ sake—
Your advice spilled
trashcans into my pit.

II.

Do you remember
how cool you were?
Big boys sleeping
in our little
beds—fucking
homework, vacuums,
brushed teeth, while
you played
make-believe invisible—
you grabbed hair,
broke my lips

through cupboards—
made of wood,
Mom, real wood—
But you rescued me
from him—I cried
and you sang Jewel
just like Jewel—I hated
you, in the kitchen
we danced cheek to
shoulder—I don't forgive
you for birthing me.

My little girls don't
want to be like you—
I did—I do,
not now, but then—
then, then then
thenthen—where
did you go? You
say he's hitting
you—you must not
see yourself anymore—
I loved your hands—
holding a cigarette,
coiling the hairs
above my neck—
I stole your money
to feed your children—
you kicked bruises—
punched threw me.
I forgave youyou
never apologized—
I never thanked you
for my thickness.

III.

The littlest baby
you tried to kill
on a trampoline,
tried to kill himself
after thirteen years—
so much for his curls.
The blonde one tears
tantrums over dry
toast, moist kisses—
her babybook ends
at age 3. Your favorite
child sees you when
homeless women wash,
in public bathrooms—
she weeps hardest
into her wet pillows.
And your first sees
your face—I never
noticed how our lips
drop to the right
when we say
words with w's.

Primo

MARIANO ZARO

He unfolds a cylinder of black velvet.
He says the names and the stones appear—
amethyst, tourmaline, peridot,
citrine, obsidian.

With long tweezers he takes the stones
and places them, one at a time, on top
of my left ring finger. Not literally
on my finger, suspended just
above the skin.

How do you like this one?, he asks.
He opens inkwells and tin boxes
with watercolors. He starts drawing.
He doesn't talk. Bent over the paper
he becomes small, absent. Outside,
the streets pause for a moment,
take a breath.

He paints with tiny brushes and
sometimes with the tip of his fingers.
His fingers, soft and precise, know
my name, the arch of my ribcage,
the platform of shoulder blades.

He blows on the paper, he stretches
his neck backwards. I can smell him—

his hair, his hands, the collar of his shirt.
The smell of him when we lived together,
the smell of breakfast on the kitchen table,
sitting next to each other
before the shower.

He gives me the drawing. This is the way
it's going to be. He says. The piece feels
heavy on the paper, is still wet, has volume.
Now he talks and builds a house around me.
A house made of facets, karats,
transparency, luster. I feel protected
and naked at the same time. It's not easy
to tolerate this proximity, this attention.

He looks old, for the first time. He has been
always the youngest of all, the most
precocious. Primo, I say, you must be tired.
He does not answer. He must be tired of carrying
these stones every day,
from place to place—Brazil, Colombia, India,
The Nederland's. All his life
carrying these stones, keeping them clean,
intact, without a scratch, alive, ready to lift
walls, windows, corridors, fountains.
He must be tired of building houses
for all of us.

Blood Alchemy

JULIETTA BARANTES, CÓRDOBA, ARGENTINA

I knew the mountain and went through her thorns
until opening my skin to the smell
I came to a clearing at the mountain top
and the sun, leering over the landscape, strengthened
the silhouette of an eagle.
My stomach was round with the moon and love,
resting with my daughter, yet pulsing inside.
There it desires a future, an adventure
of naming the plants and insects.
I didn't remember the bees that left us
fleeing the threat of a life without flowers
In my dream, she played with the flowers of the earth
learning their stems, teaching their stalks
the breath between ants and the hidden cacti
learning the unassailable defenses of the mountain
that bloomed in soft yellow sun
containing its figure between the rocks
an alchemical layer of land, fertile and wandering.
The desert green threatens the wires
with vehement winds morphed of the flower
the bees whirl upon the ropes with a mad hunger
the land to be consumed, exported, wholesale
at a devastating pace
she too is mother
I could not hold this in my mind, in the clearing,
but only saw the landscape of the eagle
and felt the inside of me the movement
of a sweet, germinating seed.

(Translated from Spanish by Paula Wright)

Diamond Hunter

JEFFREY MACLACHLAN

Casper the lion-cut Maltese always surfaces like a calaca from abandoned lots and brown weeds. La Migra swings by nights like these—Friday and warm—farms out trees rough from fingers and wolf spiders. We're just walking dog, señor. Casper always leads us to diamonds. Big stacks like egg sacks in ramshackle yards. Some say they're Juarez souls come to rest and we shouldn't harvest but I fill socks and pockets for pawning. Casper is El Chapo they say. Sinaloa spirits will steal my cot and drag me away by Toyota. These are dreams where white eyes of *morenitas* crumble down rolled bills and vanish into graupel storms. Casper waits under a carport watches pellets smack pavement ready for sunrays to retrieve them.

Tlaltecuhтли

JEFFREY MACLACHLAN

She appeared in my Chevy LUV after I killed the Hamburger Man in his stand and shook glimmering Chihuahuan sand from dark ringlets and skeleton key hair clips. Her wrists released the sweet-tree scent of copal, and I dizzied like cold tequila and fishtailed towards guard rails. Blood burst from my sawed nails. She slathered it onto the Hamburger Man's limbs, nibbling his salty lips as if on a first date. After we snorted powder shaped like a Cheshire moon, her many gnashing mouths exhaled the three thousand conversations Juarez had consumed.



These eight crosses represent the eight women who were murdered, mutilated and dumped in a vacant lot in Juarez. Below a woman begs for money near the border of Juarez and El Paso. Photographs by Jackie Joice.



Members of Viejas Eskandalosas, a group of writers and artists, at a peaceful protest showing solidarity with the families of victims in Juarez.



The Pink City and Beyond

KEVIN ADLER

The story of the child who disappears in the white-capped mountains north of the Pink City returns during the rainy season, when steam pours from mountaintop fissures and stalks their angular ledges. It descends into valley, rolling across the desert like a monsoon cloud.

Men gather on the sun-baked street of the city square around the open hood of a delivery truck, squinting into the dark tangle of rods and wires. A bleating goat pauses at their feet for a scrap of tobacco paper. It crosses the square and wanders into an alley strung with clay-stained garments. Under a ray of filtered sunlight, a man sharpens a butcher's knife on a stone.

Is this where the story begins?

True to life, the story is always beginning.

The buildings of the city square blush sunset-pink, like women in love. Tourists stand agape, while gypsies pick their pockets. "All of the city's inhabitants are gypsies," a guidebook claims, "drifting somewhere along the continuum of coming or going." To live in the city is to live as a gypsy. To live as if one is lost. But this is the story of a lost child. A story of the mountains. We are under the patchwork of rags that shade the alley beside the city square. We have entered a marketplace of ivory bangles and camel-bone pins, of fact and fantasy. Here, one finds scarves woven from the stamen of the Evening Star, sold by a man who goes by many names, his pockets woven with identities.

If two men pull you under their tent and insist that you take their picture... If they pose beside a five-legged cow, one leg sprouting auspiciously from a valley of shoulder blades, jagged as the mountains . . . If children in the

background toss a dung patty on the fire . . . And fat from round meat medallions pops in the cast iron pan . . . If the men extend the cow's fifth leg and shout, "One foot in the heavens!" laughing as though they'd told a joke, repeating it—"One foot in the heavens!"—flashing their teeth, stained blood-red with betelnut . . .

What do I do?

Take a picture.

And then?

Pay them.

For what?

The soul of the story.

"This child was an exceptional beauty," the first man begins, fat hissing on the fire behind him. "Was it the cobalt sheen of his skin, the dance of light in his eye, that caused village women to collapse at his feet? To offer themselves—women three and four times his age—wholly to him? The men were made uneasy by the attention they lavished on the boy, and at how the children of these mothers—all of them admirers of the boy—suffered increasing neglect. While the wives prepared candied cashews and figs for the boy, the men met in secret." "The boy was an aberration!" another man interrupts. "His beauty was an insult to the gods." "And so the matter was settled," the other continues. "The men gathered in the square before dawn and took the road toward the boy's house. Along the way, they passed village women, camped on the roadside, some of them their wives and sisters, asleep, cradling their gifts—small cakes and pastries, wire boxes of butterflies with eye-patterned wings. Yet, there was no need to take the boy by force. When the men arrived, the boy was waiting, lit by moonlight, on the lush lawn of his family's house. Because of his willingness, and his easy charm on the journey that ensued, it later seemed to the men that the boy had led *them* to the mountains.

"They left the village before dawn, drove high into mountains through the night. At dawn, they reached a field bordering the forest, and they gathered around the boy. One man approached with a knife, but the boy showed no fear. He began to remove his clothing, folding each piece calmly

and neatly, and laying the items on the ground in front of him. Bewildered, the man with the knife stood still and looked to the others for instruction. They, too, were struck dumb. When the boy had removed all of his clothing, he stood before them, his skin a radiant blue, and offered the last folded vestige of his life in the village. Though it was not what they had in mind, the men understood this to mean that there was no need to take the boy's life, that he would not return to the village, that he would live independently of men and women, and survive quietly and peacefully in the mountains north of the Pink City. The man returned his knife to its sheath as the others watched silently. Then, a disturbance in the grass behind the boy caught their attention. Above the tall rim of blades, the colorful head feathers of the peacock quivered. Here, the boy entered the forest, following the feathers. The foliage, say the men, embraced him like a robe.

The story has many beginnings.

Many stories do. Others share only one.

“Most stories come from the same lie,” a third man enters. “The first story begins with my father’s father, and his father, and generations beyond that, all of whom were blacksmiths. They hammered nails that fastened the joints of temples. They held together civilizations, from peasant houses to lord’s palaces. Their nails fixed criminals to their crimes. One in this line of ancestors was commissioned with four nails—one each for the criminal’s hands, one for both feet, bound together, and the fourth for the heart, to drive it through. Yet, while this blacksmith had admired the sentenced man, had found him pure of heart and wrongly convicted, he had a family of many sons and could not refuse the commission. He forged the four nails, as promised, but concealed the fourth nail, intended for the heart, by tying it to a string concealed beneath his shirt. Perhaps it is only symbol, he reasoned, but there is power in symbols. The following day, when the guards arrived to collect the nails, they received only three of the four they had commissioned. They beat the blacksmith severely, took the three nails, ransacked and burned the workshop. The fourth nail was never discovered, and as a result, the heart of the sentenced man remained pure. This blacksmith, and those who came after him, believe that because of his selfless act, he and his

descendants are the recipients of a divine reward. The blacksmith, because he had deceived in order to protect the heart of the pure, was free to deceive others thereafter, with no punishment in the afterlife. The same is believed true of his descendents, who continue to tell his story, and the story of others.

Behind the storyteller, the children lift the pan from the fire. They poke at the meat with wooden skewers and blow on them to cool them. Meanwhile, the storyteller fishes a necklace from his shirt and displays the iron nail attached. He snaps it with a boney finger, and it sings like a tuning fork.

Shall we sing of the mountains?

If you have decided to go with them.

And if the story of this child is a fiction?

It is hardly different than a missing child.

In the courtyard, the men load the truck with woolen rugs, cookware, and pellet drums. They string silver tassels and bells along the windshield frame, along the bumper and fender. In thick black eye shadow, they trace the circumference of the headlights. Thin strips of rubber form the eyelashes. It's nearly dawn when they finish. An older man takes a cracked betelnut from his pouch, on the truck's hood, traces the red route to the mountains.

"You'll find the boy at the line's end, in a valley shaded by high mountains. Grass grows tall around his body. When you find this place, remove your sandals and walk barefoot through the grass until the spine of the peacock's feather pierces your foot. Remove the spine from your heel and hold the eye to the sun. Sit and think: if you had one hundred eyes, which eye would one look into in order to find you?"

What should I bring?

Food and water. A blanket.

What will I keep?

Nothing. They will take it all and more.

The youths lick their combs as the sun rises. "Run it through your moustache,

like this,” the elder guides them. Men perch on the truck’s fenders, others atop the bumper. Three men crowd the roof, arms around a loudspeaker. In the cab, there is space for the driver one other. Outside, the elder pockets his comb and raises a fist to the dog eyeing the cow’s fifth leg, slumped over one shoulder. Soon, every cow leg accounted for, every moustache perfect, they depart for the mountains.

“When you are seated, focus awareness between the nose and upper lip, the in-and-out of breath. Let it travel the contours of the face, until it envelopes the head. Let it shower gently down the shoulders, to the torso, to the feet. Soon, the skin can be felt as one organ, continuous. Go inside the skin, to the lungs, the kidneys; follow the blood roads until awareness transcends the body, to the world beyond your skin. Let your awareness wash over meadow grass and leaf litter, weave between the ferns, into mountain streambeds, toward the Pink City and beyond.”

“Keep it steady!” men shout from the truck’s roof. In the cab, the driver digs for a pouch of betelnut, and on finding it, offers some to the passenger. “Take with lime,” he suggests. The driver throws a handful into the grave. The gums rot inside, teeth like crooked tombstones. He lights a half-smoked cheroot and slaps the passenger’s thigh. “Now we get somewhere,” he says. His two-fingered whistle warns the men on top to hold on tight. Soon, the city lies behind and below, a pink cloud of dust.

On the mountain roadside, village girls pause to watch the truck’s approach. Mothers gather close, propping mushroom baskets on their hips. The driver slows, and the men on the roof bare their teeth. They hurl lewd taunts and bottles red with saliva. The glasses crash and a woman falls back into the reeds. A headlight winks. Her basket spills into the stream, mushrooms bobbing to the surface, rushing down the mountain toward the streets of the Pink City.

Ahead, the spines of an abandoned temple pierce the fog. Low walls frame wild grounds littered with seedpod and fruit-skin mounds. Elder macaques recline on window ledges, arms hanging languid against cool walls; overhead,

adolescents race—screeching—along the upper ridges. On the low wall that borders the road, a male macaque stands sentry. “Here, in the mountains,” the driver says, “they are believers, and we are heathens.” Laughter erupts from the rooftop as a man spits red juice at the monkey. It flashes its teeth in return—white and spiny, like mountaintops.

The mountain surges upward from the roadside—bedrock patched with sage and nettle. Opposite, the city lies deep in the valley. The driver pulls to a narrow patch of shoulder where a man with a silver moustache stands, a curved pipe lodged in his gums. The driver extends a road map to the stranger and gestures back to the valley, winding and circling his finger, as if tracing the flight of a dying moth, but the man doesn’t respond. He looks beyond the driver, into the cab, at the passenger, and points at him. He appears to ask a question, but the driver waves him off and returns to the map. The man wants nothing to do with the map. Maps are made for foreigners by foreigners in foreign lands. He says something to this effect, perhaps, to which the driver responds with curses and spits. The man on the curb takes a step back. He takes a pinch of the necklace hidden beneath his shirt, and rolls it meditatively between his fingers.

What are the connections?

Between the moustache and the necklace.

Between the boy and yourself.

And between beginning and end, how much longer?

Over the pass. Down to the valley. Up, into the clouds.

The driver blows another warning whistle for the men on the rooftop. He rolls the window down and stomps the gas. Yet, oxygen is scarce in the high mountain air, and soon the truck sputters to a stall. The men dismount. “Give it some air,” the driver says. “Pop the hood and look inside,” another suggests. “Let the engine breathe.”

By most accounts, the boy lived quietly alone in the mountains after the men abandoned him. He learned to sit for days in meditation, practicing the breath, eyes closed, inhaling long, deep breaths until, at once, it seemed he

took the sky itself into his lungs. High atop the mountain ridge that framed the Pink City, he held the air inside his lungs. In time, he released it in a slow, forceful stream, and as it condensed into a cloud, it barreled down the mountain ledges and into the valley—a dark, rolling storm.

Engine cooled, the men begin again, driving upward into the night. They arrive at dawn at the edge of a field in a clearing bordered by debris—clay tea-cup fragments, the stone circles of fire pits, littered with cheroots. Peacocks gather among the dull-gray rubble, hundreds of them, planting tentative steps among the jagged edges. The men wave their hands and shout at them: “Go on!” A warning shot scatters them and their feathers fall in slow arcs. As the men gather wood for a bonfire, the passenger asks for the map. The map has been lost, he is told. Someone suggests he draw a new one.

How do I know what to draw?

The map is on your palm. We are reading it now.

Where is the end?

The dot in the center where we drive the nail home.

How do I get there?

At night, while the monsoon clouds roll in, the men will pack their truck. Before sunrise, they abandon you to the mountains. You’ll awake in the mist of morning, the songbirds silent, a hushed rustle of leaves in the underbrush. Beside you lies a sharpened knife. Take it and set out across the field. The rain is falling harder.

The reeds grow amber in the field, but the edge of the forest is dark and thick with vines. Here, where men seek shelter, you will find branches bent by the story into tall spouts of water. The force will throw you to the ground. Your feet get tangled in the undergrowth of vines. Cut them free, take a step, cut them free, take a step, and soon the knife grows dull. But the mountains are deep and infinite, and the water always rising.

How do I escape?

In the distance, through the roar of the flood, you hear a chorus of howls and cries. This is the cry of the peacock: Minh-ao, Minh-ao. Hundreds cry in unison, to those who speak the language, “There will be rain.” An indecorous

messenger of belated fortunes. Untangle yourself and follow its cries to the source, to higher ground where they roost. Wade through the valley, tangled with vines, thick with shadows. The floodwater tugs at your waist.

How will I know if I follow the source or its echo?

The cries will grow louder, more fierce than the monsoon. The ground will begin to rise, and you will walk out of the water, up to the top of the hill, where a solitary tree stands, tall as a temple. You kneel before it, exhausted, and look up, each rung of branches ornamented with a peacock worrying the flood with its cries. The water has risen to the base of the tree, and you reach for the first branch. Soon, you are lifted up by leathery wings, guided through the tree by the nudge of soft tails. A blue egg falls into your palm. Overcome by hunger, you crack it and swallow it whole. Another egg falls. You crack it and swallow it, too, and swallow it whole. Repeat, until your hands and face are cobalt blue. Inside your dry nest of feathers, you find a lost man is no more than a boy. Keep drinking, you tell yourself. The yolk is thick and sweet and the water will rise and carry you home.

At night, while the monsoon clouds roll in, the men will pack the truck. Before sunrise, they abandon you to the mountains. You'll awake in the mist of morning, the songbirds silent, the hushed rustle of leaves in the underbrush. Beside you lies a sharpened knife. You'll set out with it across the field.

The rain falls hard and the sky casts an amber glow on the reeds. You seek shelter in the forest, but the downpour bends the branches into spouts. Your feet tangle in the undergrowth of vines. You cut them free, take a step, cut them free, take a step. Soon, the knife is dull, but the mountains are deep and infinite, and the water always rising.

In the distance, through the roar of the flood, you hear the chorus of peacocks: *Minh-ao, Minh-ao*. Their cry, in translation, means, "There will be rain." You follow the cry to its source, to higher ground, wading through the high valley, tangled with vines, thick with shadows, as the water laps at your waist.

As the ground begins to rise, and you have reached the edge of the valley, the cries grow louder, fiercer than the monsoon. You pursue the cries up to their source, a solitary tree, tall as a temple, clear of vines. You kneel,

exhausted, before it and look up to the laddered rungs of branches, each ornamented with a peacock worrying the flood with impatient cries. The water rises to the base of the tree, and you must reach for the first branch. Soon, you are lifted by leathery wings, guided by tails. A blue egg has fallen into your palm. Overcome by hunger, you crack the shell and swallow it whole. Another egg falls to you. You crack it, too, and swallow it. You continue until your hands and face are blue. Inside this dry nest of feathers, you find that a lost man is no more than a boy. Keep drinking, you tell yourself. The yolk is thick and sweet and the water will carry you home.

Walk on the Wild Side

PATRICIA D'ALESSANDRO

Peacocks strut and stare at you
as though they're wearing *Nikes*
feathers fanning air and mind
that warm your aching psyches.

Orchids in my Kitchen Bloom

PATRICIA D'ALESSANDRO

Orchids in my kitchen bloom
emerging white and furred in
Citron yellow, curling upward from a crooked stock
stiff
brown, and
petrified,
not unlike a corps of Angels

or nuns flaunting wings
quintupled
from a set of triple wings
hooded at the center
in Amish bonnets
or a cave of bats
wearing lime green pantaloons
and red-striped suspenders
with delicate arms
WAVING in the air
And feet curled before you
In the shoes of an Arab Sultan.

Untitled

PABLO RODRÍGUEZ OF ALTA GRACIA, ARGENTINA

veins and arteries
moving smoke and various debris
they come and go, moving quickly, over rails,
quickly
they steer the harmonic system
towards a tune, a future
foolish
of the day

(Translated from Spanish by Paula Wright)

The Junkyard

LARRY EBY

Oxidized work trucks on cinder blocks shelter flycatchers that build nests in glove boxes broke open by thrown rocks that ricocheted off milk jugs and sun bleached bicycles. Polyethylene grocery sacks embedded in cement gravel, growing dandelions and feathertop surrounded by barb-wire crowned chain link on the outskirts of suburbia where kids ride bicycles with the Queen of Hearts close-pinned for rev-rev-reving that echoes off antique brass and cleaner-streaked windows where parents watch and suck steak from their teeth, wondering what life would be if they chose the child.

Instrucciones

ARTURO RUIZ ORTEGA

Lea usted filosofía decente.
Será un poquito difícil, seguro,
Pero es que no hay el más mínimo apuro.
Que es siempre importante, mas no es urgente
Que llegue al final tan rápidamente.
Haga del arte una buena costumbre,
Pero nunca siga a la muchedumbre.
Consulte los libros de la academia
Pero recuerde que ahí sufren de anemia
Como así también de óxido y herrumbre.

No lea jamás libros de autoayuda
Porque si de eso algo le hace sentido
Es pues porque de otra parte ha salido
¡Mire que con desfachatez menuda
Venden soluciones y esconden dudas!
Cuidado porque hay mucho caradura
Que descaradamente le asegura
Que vende de las mejores respuestas
Y resultan luego en vanas apuestas
Mire que ni una respuesta perdura

Pues porque este mundo es siempre cambiante.
Si usted quiere hacer una cosa seria
Y no meros malabares de feria
Evite los dogmas recalcitrantes
Y formule nuevos interrogantes.

Si bien es harto difícil que pueda
Inventar por segunda vez la rueda
No sería raro que sí pudiera
Hacerla girar de nueva manera
Y que no sea otra falsa moneda.

This is Just to Say

ARTURO RUIZ ORTEGA

I have entered
this class
just for steal
the process

that you
use for creating
poetry in English

and to learn
a language that seemed
for war
and commerce.

Curs de Poesia L-mental

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

1. Els articles L-mentals de la poesia són:
la lluna, la primavera, una posta de sol, els ocells, els somnis.
2. I tu, dins un sac que és dins d'un sac que és dins d'un sac,
fas vivac a la nit de la vida i tens fred.
3. Cafè, copa i puro, però que sigui abans que plougui.
4. Complir sense prometre a prometre sense complir
es infinit a zero en el marcador del futbol de l'amor.
5. La poesia és a l'hospital, o al costat d'una carretera de la costa.
6. I és el passat, que no ha cedit el pas.
7. ¿Perquè penseu que una infermera dóna afecte i una puta no?
8. Si espolses estovalles amb molles pel balcó
les formigues faran el camí invers fins la teva cuina.
9. Però si gires la casa i la fiques al mar, serà un vaixell.
10. Tot depèn del color amb què t'ho mires:
si és el color del teu criteri o el del meu.
11. I és perquè no encaixes enlloc que pots anar tan lluny.
12. Ets un fatídic poeta perdedor: sempre volent fracassar.
Sense sortir-te'n.

L-mental Poetry course

ANNA AGUILAR-AMAT

1. The L-mental elements of poetry are:
the moon, spring, sunset, birds, and dreams.
2. And you, inside a bag inside a bag inside a bag,
bivouac-ed in the blackness of existence and you're freezing.
3. Coffee, brandy and a cigar, but let's have them before it's raining.
4. To comply without promising to promise without complying
is infinity to zero on love's stadium score screen.
5. Poetry is institutionalized, or beside a road beside the coast.
6. And it's the past, which has never moved aside to let the future pass.
7. Why do you think a nurse pours out affection and a whore doesn't?
8. If you shake the crumbs from the tablecloth on to your balcony
the ants will find their way back to your kitchen.
9. But turn the house upside down and dunk it in the sea, it'll float like a ship.
10. Everything depends on the color through which you see it:
yours or mine, the color of opinion.
11. And it's because you don't fit anywhere that you're able to go such a distance.
12. You're a poet, fated to lose; you're dying to fail.
And you do.

(Translated from Catalan by Liz Hildreth, with the author)

Last Words of St. Lawrence

MARSHA SCHUH

According to learned astronomers,
The Perseids arrive in mid-August.
Our Northern Hemisphere,
the part of Earth we stand upon,
begins to fly headlong
into a comet's debris stream.

This shower of meteors, the Perseids,
is often called Tears of St. Lawrence,
a man who had the right to weep
for he was martyred
on a gridiron
like a sacred Roman chicken,
marinated in lime
and other secret ingredients.

Strange last words from a saint:
Assum est, inquit; versa et manduca
which, being translated, literally means
He is roasted, it is said;
turn and chew,
or as one might more eloquently construe,
This side is done;
turn me over and have a bite.

Nice touch.
May your legacy remain:
if caught in a great debris stream,
made to fly headlong into that good night,
leave them with one final brilliant flash.

Panamint Valley to Trona

MARSHA SCHUH

The Egg unzips, and spills
volcanoes, mountains, knolls
drizzled in honey, chocolate, and rose.
The Ocean zips and abandons the dunes
that faintly recall her shore;
Dark waves subside,
Wind shuffles silt,
Sun roasts, then puzzles the earth,
warmed by myriad sunsets,
bleached echoes of paradise.

Then the lone night fires,
blue sparks flying upward
to shoulders wrapped in slicing stars,
casting blossoms along the aisles
that beckon innumerable Abrams
to leave these shafts and their tents,
forgetting their covenants
and cross a Jordan for Canaan,
speaking the words that sever
to emerge in sulfur town,
splintered from their souls.

Epígono

RAFFAEL CORREA

Envejezco entre ruidosos
silencios,
despierto sobre senos
dóciles,
me llueven caricias
y temores.
Quieto, desvelado
mi pregunto
qué albatros
agrio de noches condensadas,
rebotante de húmedas nostalgias
me inciará
en el primer paso de mi ayer.

Tiempo

RAFFAEL CORREA

¿No era immortal su rostro?"

—Pedro Lastra

¿Y acaso no es la mariposa tiempo,
no es su tiempo
sonata de una fuga?

Ella razona lentamente
prometiéndole distancia
al tiempo
mientras en esta estación
de desvaríos
crecen las lombrices,
se esmeraldan las montañas,
y en un barranco
languidece un deseo,
se encona una nota de Parker,
una lágrima pierde la voz

Oil

MARIA DEPETRIS, OF CÓRDOBA, ARGENTINA

we fall slowly
and almost not at all
the forces neither weighing,
nor holding,
nothing

but drizzling, black
oil machines
in the empty dark
they form the arena of nothing
where nothing is born
but flares that spark and end

but they are waiting,
spying
they regret....
they return...
and still following,
regretting,
they take the command,
killing a dream of thousands
that once wandered after a force...
in order to be able
to fall.

(Translated from Spanish by Paula Wright)

An Ode to Chrome, or, A Just Sense of Superiority

MATTHEW BATT

“When I see an adult on a bicycle I do not despair
for the future of the human race.”

—H.G. Wells

It makes Americans nervous, adults on bikes. But cheesy as it is, to ride a bike as an adult—whether for joy, competition, or just to commute—is to defer the death of childhood. Riding a bike is about infusing joy into every inch of pavement. Riding a bike is about making a game of transportation. Riding a bike is a way to place yourself outside of the maze—to take yourself off of the grid while at the same time getting to mess with it. There is no greater frustration to a driver locked in gridlock than to see bike after zippy little freaking bike pass by his window. You’re stuck in traffic, watching the light cycle through another revolution of green, yellow, red and you haven’t moved in twenty minutes—whoever caused this better really be hurt, you think—but these bikers—these fucking bikers—they just keep coming and going like they think they’re better than the rest of us—like they’re some kind of superior civilian because they’re riding their fancy little bikes. Ought to go back to France.

When I was a kid, I dreamed in chrome. Chrome frames, chrome bars, chrome necks, hubs, spokes, forks, cranks. There was no conceivable reason anything other than rubber shouldn't be chrome. When I was in the Mrs. Noe's fourth grade, when we weren't trying to kill Patches the gerbil by feeding it erasers, we were writing poetry. The other kids wrote about footballs and tutus, Millennium Falcons and Smurfs. I wrote an ode to chrome.

It wasn't very good: the Lone Ranger's horse named Silver, the color of a magic bullet, and then spurs and swords and coins and mirrors and the color of speed, but when I was a kid, there simply wasn't a thing I could imagine that shouldn't be chrome. (Or silver—I was eight—I didn't know chrome wasn't silver. I just knew it was beautiful.)

I'll let you in on a secret. Cyclists are a superior class of civilian. We are, in fact, better people. We are happier, better adjusted human beings. We make for cheerier co-workers. We take better care of our gardens, our houses, our pets, ourselves, our families. Plus, we're more fun to drink with because we're not killing your sons and daughters when we ride home drunk.

But it's not because we're physically, intellectually, or genetically superior. It's because to ride a bike in a land of road-enraged, cell-phone addled, coffee drinking, CD changing, two-ton, block-long SUV driving morons is to know that every minute could be your last. Every car that comes up from behind, every truck that doesn't appear ready to stop as you pass through an intersection, ever closed door that might fly open . . . there are more ways to die riding a bike than there are to survive.

To ride a bike is to put yourself at risk. It is to take a chance far greater than that of an average car commuter. The average compact car today has air bags and seat belts and crumple zones and safety glass and thousands of other little precautionary devices and mechanisms that will help drivers survive most accidents that don't involve trains. I have a twenty dollar helmet that is made out of Styrofoam and plastic with some felt padding and nylon webbing. It weighs about as much as a couple slices of bread. If I drop it from waist high it might not break but I should replace it anyway. The average road bike never has more than one square inch of rubber in contact with the road at any given time. When we're standing, depending on our shoe size, we might have as

much as a square foot and a half of shoe on the ground. A car or truck has four tires and up to three square feet of rubber to the pavement. Most cars have a tremendously low center of gravity—I'm guessing about around 18 inches—to get one to roll over you have got to put some serious alcohol or hills into the equation. My bike's center of gravity, when I'm not on it, is about the same as a car. When I'm in the saddle, my bike's center of gravity is my center of gravity. That is, right around my belly button. About three and a half feet up. It's just like what it looks like: a hundred fifty pound weakling sprawled across a twenty pound network of steel, rubber and wire. It is a miracle that it works at all.

To think that we can, as a species, rarely fun faster than ten miles an hour, and yet on a bike, we can easily double or triple that. The revolution of an average pedal stroke—with a 42 tooth chainring up front and a 17 tooth sprocket in the back—converts to a distance of 66.7 inches. To torque muscle into a 15 inch circle moves the bike and rider five and a half feet. To be propelled by only human force to over three times our natural speed while teetering on the spatial equivalent of two fingertips is not something I can take for granted. Particularly when considering traffic, car doors, drunks, hoodlums, broken glass, sewer grates, narcoleptics, gangstas and tinted windows into the equation. Which is to say always.

I am a better human being for riding my bike because I am not in another car. I will not T-bone your station wagon and wipe out your progeny. I will not pollute your neighborhood into a chugging, throttling, idling factory of steel and smoke. I will not run over your dog. I will not doze off and ride through the side of your house and kill you while you sleep. I won't even jar you out of sleep when I drive by without my thumpin' sound system.

Wherever you are, how did you get there? What do you remember about it? What did you see? What did you think? What did you listen to? What did you hear? How much better do you feel? Or, to push it to where it likely went anyway, How stressful was it? How annoying was that guy in front of you? What about that bastard in the Caprice who passed you on the right? Or the dickhead in the Hummer who was so close he might have been in tow? Or that asshole with the W sticker swerving from lane to lane in his Benz that cost more than your house? The one who was swerving from lane to lane as if he were invoking some manifest destiny of the highway? Seriously, didn't you want to kill him? When was the last time you hated somebody as much as that?

The last time you were in a car, perhaps?

When I am on my bike, I ride, steer and stop with my whole body. If any part of me checks out or nods off or answers the phone or changes the radio or fumbles through my bag, I fall down. That's all.

Most of us don't ride because we've never had a bike we felt at home with. I am a lucky man. I have had many. I got my first real bike at a place called The Torque Center.

Inside an otherwise drab, squat brick building was a dizzying array of chrome and rubber, plastic and metal. Every surface was an opportunity for advertisement and overstatement. There were jerseys hanging from ceiling tiles and sunglasses sprouting from the walls. Handlebars draped from floor to rafter. Jeweler's display cases glowed with chromed sprockets and nickel-plated chains. And everywhere—everywhere—there were bikes. Bikes on tiered stands, bikes hanging from the ceiling, bikes stacked on bikes on bikes on bikes.

The year was 1980 and collectively, we didn't quite know where we were going chromatically. The jerseys were a mishmash of post-hippy fades from brown to orange to burnt umber, and yet some of the manufacturer's stickers, "Direct from Cali," were beginning to threaten our retinas with neon yellows and lime greens and unforgivable pinks. But where there was some debate as to whether the right color for a jersey was meant to blind or mellow, there was no question about the bikes: the bikes were chrome. A mirror of speed, a glint of a razor, the reflection of the self approaching a blurry velocity, the bikes, the bikes were chrome.

On a bike, being there is getting there.

A still point of motion and stasis. As Zeno might have had it, the rider never moves. The rider is seated, his legs circle in an infinite centripetal cadence. The bike moves and the rider with it, but the orientation of rider to bike and of bike to rider is perpetual, a constant, preserved and preserving.

For a long time in my life, the words “4130 chromemoly” meant more to me than the name of any girl. Once thought to be the ideal balance of flexibility and strength, we have now engineered beyond it. But then, in the Renaissance of the 1980s, how like a god was man. If Prometheus were alive at the time, he would have given us chromemoly.

I went to a public school in West Allis, Wisconsin, its namesake being Allis Chalmers, the global manufacturer of gears and engines. My class mates in grade school were the sons and daughters of honest, god-fearing, labor-unified, beer-drinking Lutherans with a serious Packer problem.

My options in these lean times were:

1. To get the living shit beat out of me on a daily basis by fifteen-year old fifth graders with names like—I am not making this up—Tim Fairtag or Scott Kazabuski or Kevin Piotrowski;

2. Hope to get in good enough with the crackle-haired WHAM!-shirted girls named Nikki Fink (my first girl-friend) and Jillane Stephaniak (my second) and Michelle Grezchowiak (my third) so that I could wet my pants in front of their pipe-fitter fathers;

3. Hang out with my mommy in her flower shop and thereby seal my fate to all of the above; or;

4. Ride.

The mythos of the road and what it means to ride upon it is writ often and large in our Western world. We know what we’re supposed to think when somebody says, Man, to hell with this, I’m getting on my bike and going for a ride.

You mean that you’re going to go sort things out, one mile, one block, one pedal-stroke, one revolution at a time. You’re going to at once slow things down and speed them up. There’s not going to be any metal coffin surrounding you as you putter around town with all the other geriatrics in their Dummies and their SOBs. You’re going to make time and space irrelevant as you slip through calcified traffic like light through the ambergris of the past/present/future. Time is irrelevant. Space is merely a medium. You’re on your bike. You’re out for a ride. It’s not a way to spend a day. It’s a way to be in a day. It’s a way to be.

The dream as demonstrated by the premature lionizing of the bike-bound messenger/racer culture is its own critique. I mean, has ever a decent—hell, just not ridiculous—work of art ever held a bike as its object, the rider as its subject and not a symbol for something else?

There was recently the *Triplets of Bellville* about a French cyclist who is abducted by the mafia for private betting on fixed simulation races. Nice, but more about motherhood than riding.

There is, much to my dismay, *Quicksilver*, starring Kevin Bacon as a bike ballerina/messenger, which in many ways was the epoch and the nadir of cycling films.

Then there was *Breaking Away* in the late seventies which seems now like an hallucination (remember those blond, midwestern afros spilling out of tight leather helmets?). It was about corn-pone country boys overcoming the evil bearded Soviets. Like every other Cold War era movie.

And somewhere in-between there was *Rad!* Where else but in 1982 could the human heart find its wanting at a high school prom with a boy on a bike, dancing, so to speak, with his date to “Send Me an Angel.”

Of singular worth is DeSica’s classic, *The Bicycle Thief*, but it was Italian and not really about bikes at all.

My First Real Bike.

The S.E. Industries Toby Henderson “Hauler.”

No one then, as now, has ever heard of Toby Henderson or his fabled name-sake Hauler, but I guess S.E. just figured he was a sponsored rider and they needed something on the market other than their dominating P.K. Ripper, and so the fearsome Toby it was.

It was chrome from chainstay to headset and everywhere in-between—in contrast to all the schizophrenic color wars of the time—the decals were a tasteful black-and-white fade reminiscent, I thought then, of KISS’s logo (except for the fact that it said *HAULER* as if it were something altogether worse—and much more complicated—than KISS). The tires were knobby and the grips were gnarly; the seat was hard black plastic and the forks were

huge—quite possibly the thing that gave rise to the phrase, “totally tubular.” They were as big around as bratwurst and were known among connoisseurs as the S.E. Landing Gear. They, too, were chrome.

Today when I see pachukos thumping down the drag with their tasseled dashes and their humping suspensions, I smirk but I also understand. It’s not about commuting or being garish, it’s about adornment. Understatement is for the very rich or the very poor—for everybody else in-between, it just seems natural to dress up what you got. My S.E. Hauler was tricked out with dice valve caps, ODI mushroom grips, matching S.E. Hauler pads for the top tube, neck, and cross bar (all nut protection, mind you), and before long I even had a race plate zip-tied to the bars as if I would ever actually treat my Hauler like a beast of burden and subject it to competition. No, it was my show pony. My first love. And until it got stolen out of my garage two weeks later, there was nothing that could come between us.

Before I was yet a teenager, I was a grommet. A washer. A little nut-monkey, as the employees of the Torque Center not-so affectionately called me and my bike-store loitering kind. I would ride against four lanes of 40 mile-per-hour traffic up National Avenue to the store, just to buy a new pair of eight-ball valve caps or a two-dollar sticker that said No Posers.

I never considered myself a poser because, well, I rode my bike. True, I did like to dress it up as much as any Holly Hobby afflicted girl, but, in my defense, a doll is hardly any end in itself. A bike is not an imitation of something else—a baby, say—a bike is its own way of life.

Before long, my intentions were winnowed from the artificers and I was on a friendly basis with two of South-eastern Wisconsin’s most fabled (non-professional) riders: Duane and Arlo. I was just barely twelve at this point and they were of indeterminate age—beyond high school and old enough to work full time, but somehow not able or willing to live outside of their respective parents’ basements.

Fashion came late—if indeed it has ever come—to Wisconsin, and as late as 1983 Duane and Arlo both had bushy, white-guy afros and patchy handlebar moustaches. I remember Duane having pants so tight that he didn’t even have to roll-and-peg his Jordaches like I did. Arlo always seemed more comfortable

in his indecently-short OP corduroy shorts with a yellow, baby blue, and pink Torque Center jersey.

They weren't, of course, "real riders"—nothing like the sponsored racers and freestylers—but they were older and they had sweet bikes and they would hang out with me.

Duane was something of a BMX bodhisattva, and there was simply no direct approach to the level of enlightenment he represented. Arlo, on the other hand, said Ground Floor with everything he did. First of all he let a 12 year old twaker like me hang out with him. Second, he was probably 20 and still rode his BMX bike to work. Third, he was a real sucker for Styx and whenever anything from Dennis DeYoung came on the radio all conversation or riding came to a halt as he belted out his Domo Arigato to the very esteemed and most reverend Mr. Roboto.

Duane also worked at the Torque Center, but whereas Alro was more or less restricted to stickers and Vans sales, Duane was the BMX manager. And if you take away all of today's multi-thousand dollar mountain bikes with their full suspensions and their disc brakes; if you take away all the patina-ed and filigreed road bikes with their feather-weight élan and their carbon fibered bionics; if you take away the fact that anybody who would ride such a bike is out to emasculate himself and his fortunes in order to stave off some pending mid-life crisis or to satisfy that precious death drive of the privileged young; if you take that all away and try to remember that twenty years ago bikes were just bikes and not opportunities for some kind of compensatory life, then you would perhaps be able to understand me when I say: Duane was the man. He could really ride. Despite his unfortunate facial hair and cripplingly tight pants, I will always respect him.

In the intervening years, I have lived in some very bike-un-friendly cities. Boston, Massachusetts and Columbus, Ohio being at the very top of the list. Boston has granite curbs that resemble rough-hewn tombstones that jut up from the gutter. If you have to veer ever so slightly to avoid a suddenly stopped car and its brain-high mirror, there's a good chance you'll get sucked into the gutter and then slammed into the curb. If you're lucky, you'll wake up with your bike wrapped around you and the tree or pedestrian you have recently

become conjoined with.

In Ohio, there is simply no concept of bike or bike rider. Being too close to the home of the automobile, I suppose, the streets have no shoulder nor any possibility of a bike lane, and the drivers there seem less bewildered than threatened by the presence of a bike-wielding terrorist flanking up and down their roads.

I once lived in Madison, Wisconsin—that Berkeley of the Midwest—where The Divine Right of Pedestrians and Bicyclists is still regarded as most holy. From where I lived on the east side of town to the university four miles away, I would pass no less than nine bike stores. There were bike lanes on nearly every street and bike- and pedestrian-only zones right in the middle of the city’s busiest commercial district. Can you imagine a traffic-free, pedestrian-zones Times Square? Why is that such an absurd thought? What’s the matter with us?

Anyhow, in Wisconsin, in a state where ice-fishing and Packer-fanship are as important as your attendance in church and at the sacramental Friday Fish Fry, bicycling is similarly regarded as holy. Perhaps because Wisconsin is often used as the default-joke of lazy Hollywood screenwriters and the last ditch effort of presidential candidates that have already been bled and disemboweled by New Hampshire and Iowa, we regard ourselves as other and have come to claim it as a privilege and a proud war-won badge of honor. Also the home to the only noteworthy American motorcycle manufacturer, Harley-Davidson, Wisconsin also claims as their own some of the world’s best bike frame builders like Schwinn, Paramount, Waterford, and Trek.

In Wisconsin, what you ride—be it bike or car or cycle—had better be at least in part what you made. I understood this on an instinctual level thanks to all the after-market items at the Torque Center. But I think I first really got it when I was introduced to the Hutch Trickstar.

Duane, of course, had a Hutch and I remember when it arrived from California. He opened the box and pulled out, rather anti-climactically, a frame and fork. No wheels. No seat. No bars. No cranks, pedals, chain, spokes. Just this nude skeleton of chrome. I didn’t get it.

He shaped his hair like he was handling a basketball. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and said, “To know your bike, man, you got to build your bike.”

Sadly, just as I began to understand Duane's teaching, I got my driver's license and bikes were relegated to the world of toys and crayons. But just before I quit the Torque Center and left for college, I ordered a bike—a road bike—that I built up myself. It was a 1991 Specialized SIRRUS and it was not a particularly fancy bike. The frame was made of steel tubing and it was brazed together using investment cast lugs and then painted a blue that risked being black. Even though I neglected that bike for several intervening years, as teenagers neglect everything that loves them, that bike would not forsake me.

The idea of revolution is obviously imbedded in the very concept of the wheel. And yet, through a not-so-mysterious chain of devolution, we have come to consider commuting less an occasion to move ourselves than something merely to endure. What if you could have fun on your way to work? What if you didn't regard exercise as something you had to pay to do in a place where you feel like you're up for auction? What's so silly about it?

A couple of years ago, while I was living in Madison, I got it stuck in my head that I was going to build a fixed gear bike and fulfill one of my life dreams: to become a bike messenger. As long as I could remember, I wanted to be a courier. Boys who grow up in the country want to be cowboys. Boys who grow up in Hawaii want to be surfers. I grew up on a bike and I wanted to be a messenger. I wanted to build a bike without gears or brakes and ride suicidally against traffic with a bag full of letters on my back.

Not surprisingly, the number of fixed gear riders is on the rise. The bike market is absolutely choked with crap. It's almost impossible to buy a decent bike for under a thousand dollars today. To find somebody who knows that what is new is not necessarily better is about as easy as finding God—the real one, not the white guys with oil money popping out of their pockets—on TV. There are a few high-end manufacturers catering to an elite, savvy crowd of riders (the makers of Rivendell and Surly bikes, for example, or the gentle folk of Harris Cycles) but for the most part you'd be better off buying a twenty-year old Raleigh for thirty bucks than almost anything sold in the stores today.

Or, you can do what I did and take your old Specialized and build the bike

you always wanted to ride. A fixed gear bike.

The principles of a fixed gear bike are simple:

1. There is no derailleur. There are no shifters. There are no gears, plural.
2. There is one gear. When you pedal forward, the crank moves the chainring and the chainring moves the chain and the chain moves the sprocket and the sprocket moves the rear wheel. Forward.
3. When you pedal backward, the same applies.
4. There is no coasting. I repeat: There is no coasting. If you are not pedaling, you are not moving. The relationship of the rider to the bike is as direct as your leg to your foot as your foot to the pedal as the pedal to the crank as the crank to the wheel. You are one with the bike. You become inertia, perpetual motion.
5. If you need to stop quickly, tough shit.

Until last year with Bianchi's Pista, you couldn't even buy an off-the-shelf fixed gear bike. The only way you were liable to run into one was if one ran into you jaywalking across Madison Avenue. If you ride a fixed-gear—affectionately known as a *fixie*—you built it yourself.

Fixed gear bikes are the descendents of track racing bikes, which also have only one fixed gear and no brakes. They do this, oddly enough, for safety and speed reasons. They are racing on a closed, banked, oval track and any sudden change in speed would mean disaster for the dozen riders a nanosecond behind your rear tire. On the street, a different rationale applies.

In New York or San Francisco where messengers flaunt their lives like Roman candles, riding a *fixie* is absolutely *de rigueur* for membership in their Kamikaze club. They want to go fast and they don't want to stop and they want everybody to know that not only do they not have to stop—they can't. This does not interest me much, nor do I think it could explain why fixed gear bikes are on the rise.

Bikes are becoming too much like cars. There are on-board computers measuring your heartbeat and marking your speed, distance, and cadence; shifters are imbedded in the brake levers; gears are growing out of gears; there

are shocks and suspensions to manage and so many buckles and clips and straps and outfits to pour yourself into so that riding a bike now is as complicated as running a small government. You can literally spend entire rides shifting and clicking and coasting with gears and buttons and bells and whistles. Why not install a dashboard and be done with it?

Riding a fixed gear bike is about both getting back to that childhood self who rides because that's what we're supposed to do, as well as progressing forward to a place where human energy is synchronized with mechanical perfection. The wheel is perfect. The bike is its harness. The gears are our translator and movement is our language. Riding a fixed gear bike there is a constant, committed correlation between your movement and your bike's. In this world full of cant and spin and idle toilsome activities, riding a fixie is one of the only places where you know what moves you.

Modern bikes have dropouts—the place where the rear wheel attaches to the frame—that are nearly vertical and thereby impractical to any would-be fixie. For a fixed gear bike you need the ability to adjust the rear wheel backwards and forwards because there is no derailleur to take up any slop in the chain. It's somewhat surprising, then, that a fixed gear bike's ideal frame is a junker Raleigh from the seventies which had long, swanky horizontal dropouts to accommodate lax manufacturing standards.

When I was looking to build mine, I went through a dozen bike stores—before I found somebody who could help me—somebody who even knew what I was talking about. I felt like a pilgrim working through the stations of the cross in a city of Pharisees. They treated me like a fool, like a blasphemer, like a scourge. They didn't have anything that I wanted to buy and so I was useless. Moreover, I sought answers that they didn't even know had questions. I said, "I'm looking for a fixed gear cog," and they'd hold up a freewheel. I'd say, "That's a freewheel. I'm looking for a fixed gear cog." They'd look to the side. They'd look down. They'd rummage around in a cardboard box. They'd show me another freewheel.

Then one day I caught the guys in Revolution Cycles just as they were closing up. It was a strange bike store and I felt a little hopeful; the showroom, as such, took up about fifty square feet—the size of a public bathroom, say. The

shop area, which was only separated by a counter, took up the entire rest of the building and had four bike stands and as many mechanics.

Somewhat shy and bruised from my search, I said, “I know you guys are closing up, but I was wondering if you all know anything about fixed gear bikes.”

Somebody dropped a wrench in the shop. A guy with a mohawk wiped his hands on a red rag. He said over his shoulder, “Hey, any of you guys know anything about them fixed gear bi-cycles.”

For a second I didn’t know if he was kidding or not, and was ready to bolt out the door. Then he pulled a pair of Pabst Blue Ribbons from behind the counter, gave one to me and locked the front door.

At least that’s what it felt like. I don’t know if I remember the beer part exactly right, but I do know that a guy named Martin took the time to talk gear ratios and flip-flop hubs with me. He loaned me some literature on wheelbuilding and urged me to keep “at least one brake” for a while. “For the hills and the bad drivers of big cars,” he said. We toasted to that.

I bought a chain, a cheap rim, a hub and a fixed gear cog. I laced up a rim on my own from a pile of spokes and nipples and a cheap aluminum rim. I took off my derailleur, and my overly-complicated geared wheel, and I put on my new one, tightened the bolts and I was ready to ride.

Within a block I saw a pothole and, instinctively, let my legs go loose at about mid-revolution so as to coast over the obstacle, but the cranks kept turning and a few minutes later I figured out why I was sitting in the middle of the street, wearing a bike as a necklace.

Nothing worth doing is easy, right?

I won’t lie. It takes a lot of getting used to. There is nothing more natural than wanting to coast. But there is almost nothing more rewarding to get over.

I’m willing to admit a lot when it comes to the cheese factor of cycling. With your magical Betelgeuse powers all you have to do is say *Quicksilver Quicksilver Quicksilver* and any superficially inflated ego of mine should instantly fart out the window like a popped balloon.

But when it comes down to it, this is the truth: I've never been happier in daily life than I have been on a fixed gear bike. I believe in bikes to not only transport us from place to place but from self to self. Much in the same way it is said that the problem with air travel is that your body arrives too far ahead of your soul, so I hold it is for cars, or even most over-gear-ed bikes. You spend your time dialing in the radio, drinking your coffee, doing your make-up, talking on the phone, shifting gears, braking into bumpers, accelerating into stop signs . . . I don't need to tell you. You know it's true. Unless something tragic happened, you don't remember a thing about getting wherever you are other than it was tedious. You got upset about missing a light, or maybe somebody cut in front of you or was just going idiotically slow and, for a second—you felt it—you wanted to kill him.

If more of us were above the wheel instead of behind it, the world would immediately be a better place and we would be happy.

I know it's self-righteous but it is also true. We have become a nation of always-already, hyper-harried, over-throttled, under-patient drivers, only we don't seem to be able to recognize the fact that we're letting it happen. When the journey is only that which gets in the way of the destination, we ultimately become a bunch of anger-drunk commuters who consider our lives in perpetual deferment. For many, the idea of *Star Trek* teleporting is the greatest goal of science and technology. To think! Just wanting to go someplace, punching in a code, and *being there*. To me, I can hardly think of anything so depressing as an age irreverent of manpower, a world without wheels, a life without transitions.

You could do it too, you know. There's no test. No admission fee. No board of regents keeping you out. You've got a bike. You could figure it out. You could ride.

The bike is not a toy or a tool, nor are you merely a facilitator. You are the engine and the engineer. You are the fuel. You are the power. You are the mover and that which is moved. You are motion. You are force. You are velocity. You ride. Come on. *Ride*.

The Pity Artist

JEN GIBBS

His mother died suddenly and far from the New England roost she'd shared with five venerable generations of her line. It was violent, her death (the casket would be closed). Fate, or, if the rumors are to be believed, the vengeful ghost of a Puritan ancestor had wielded an air conditioner the very week she sold the ancestral farmhouse to take year-round comfort in Boca Raton. Indeed, it looked suspicious that after fending off ten years of Floridian swelter without so much as a shiver, the appliance lunged from an upstairs window just as the stooped, wren-like mother pressed an inquisitive Kex against a hairline crack in the bungalow's foundation.

Her son received the news with bewildered calm, as though it were a Nightline piece on a breakthrough in the treatment of child cancer or a political coup in a faraway place. There would be ramifications, he understood this, but he could no more imagine what they might have to do with him than he could picture Boca Raton. His mother had never burdened him with photographs and their holiday phone calls had always been, he realized now, about him. He removed a postcard from the refrigerator, his only artifact of the citrus state, sent by a college mate he'd lost track of long ago. It was a photograph of four winsome behinds, each with a cusp of bikini bottom in a different primary color. Aside from this, his images of Florida had been gleaned from the Weather Channel, to which he fell asleep every night. As he packed a duffel bag with whatever dark clothes he could find, his imagination toggled between oil-glossed hineys and palm trees bent under seasonal tempests. Certainly his mild, colorless mother could not have had much to do with either.

The family friend who'd delivered the news had passed along a padded mailing envelope with a Florida postmark. It contained a cloth-covered address book and an oversized sympathy card with praying hands in soft focus on the cover and a dozen ladylike signatures within. Apparently, his mother had amassed a formidable circle of friends in the tropical clime, far more than he'd ever known her to have in rural Vermont. A note written in

even script informed him that the package was from the Boca Raton Ladies' Sympathy Club, which collectively mourned the loss of one of their most talented and valued members.

It was dark and cold in Vermont and his car slid twice on its way to the airport. He was just in time to catch a red-eye. Snow ran like snot down the plane windows before take-off. He supposed that they would have to wait until spring thawed the solid Berkshire ground before they could bury his mother beside his father, and he wondered where one might store a mother's body before its final slumber. He changed planes in New York, dozed, and later, stumbled onto the tarmac and into the startling stageplay of Florida, with its barely-real fruit trees and palms backlit by a pastel dawn. As it turned out, he did not need to call any of the numbers listed in the address book: when he arrived at the prefab bungalow in its nameless cul de sac, the entire membership of his mother's club was there. As he had never, not once, set foot inside Florida let alone his mother's other house, it did not seem absurd to him that he, spare key in hand, should be led from room to room by a gentle-voiced septuagenarian in white slacks and a navy striped sweater.

"She did such wonderful work, you know," the lady said, leathery tanned cheeks blooming with artificial roses.

Another widow trailed them spryly, despite the cane, and agreed with emphatic little nods. "No one could pour it on like Lydia!"

Before he knew it, they were passing again through the humble atrium and into the livingroom, where the other members waited. "Do sit on the davenport, dear," another fine-boned woman with silvery hair pleaded, patting the vinyl beside her. They served him coffee and four different kinds of fruited bread, and in the stream of their head-tilted kindness, let him know that his mother had been what they considered a real pity artist.

"A pity what?" he said. How little he had known about his mother! The mug in his hand seemed to shrink to the size of a demitasse cup.

The ladies didn't seem to mind repeating themselves. "An artist, dear. Very accomplished!" they exclaimed.

The septuagenarian leaned to pat his knee placidly and warbled, "Such technique! So subtle, you'd hardly notice."

"Nothing like most of us," a lady added wistfully. "Her subjects wouldn't even know what she'd done, would just go on with their lives."

As their voices rose and fell, the couch got smaller and the air closer, and he realized he was turning all elbows and knees, shoulders and feet. The coffee cup was like a thimble in his hands. At first he supposed it was a trick of a grieving mind, but when his leg knocked over the coffee table without him changing position, he realized he was actually growing. The ladies cooed kindly and patted him until he felt the ceiling press against his bent head and the boards of the second floor buckled as his head cracked through. He could hear the ladies chattering on below, and, peering down through the plaster dust and rubble, he saw they'd simply grabbed their cups and saucers and scooted out of the way when his legs shoved their chairs to the walls. What would they think of him, the one they were calling poor boy, the one for whom they'd waited and baked bread, ruining his dead mother's home?

Strangely, there was room enough for the old women to get up and smooth their garments, and call forth a parade of men, women, and children—bank tellers and grocery store clerks, neighbors and relatives—who posed in the space between his legs in sets of five as if for a police line-up, then solemnly turned their faces upward so he could get a good look. In each of them the son recognized his own slump-gutted posture, his preoccupied gaze. To them, as to him, his mother's skill had gone undetected.

"But she said nothing," he said. "Nothing."

"We know, dear. And that's the wonder of it!" the women chimed. "Like a quilt sewn with the tiniest stitches!"

"But now that we've met you," the septuagenarian was a speck at his foot, "we can see that you were her greatest work of all."

And now, seeing he had become as large as he could get, the women of the Boca Raton Ladies' Sympathy Club dabbed their eyes with lotion-enhanced tissues and tiptoed down the walk, blowing kisses.

The son would never be sure how long he sat, curled like a snail in the center of the house. The sun rose and sweat dripped down his back, it set and insects came to bite at him. Eventually, he pressed his head against the constricting roof and, with only a small bit of pain and effort, straightened his neck to dislodge its planks and tiles. His head broke through in time for him to catch the flamingo hues of another sunrise. By noon, a desperate thirst compelled him to stretch one arm out the bathroom window and another out the window that had failed to hold the air conditioner, walk his

fingers down the outside walls and dig them into the crumbling foundation. His legs, he found with some relief, could stick out the front and back doors. In this fashion, he managed to yank the house up to his haunches like a very stiff and ill-fitting pair of overalls. In this awkward situation, he managed a bowlegged but serviceable gait by which he returned north to his homeland's ice and snow. And if any take umbrage that as he did he thought not once about his mother's body (which the Ladies' Club was pleased to bury in state), they may be comforted knowing her house serves as his shell to this day.

The Little Red House

ANETA CRUZ

Winner of the 2011 Desert Literary Society Fiction Award

The death of Otto Mann's wife in October 1995 brought him great relief. He could finally stop pretending that he loved her. He didn't—couldn't—love anyone. He married her out of pity, which she knew, and she'd settled for that. He could finally stop pretending that the feelings of guilt didn't gnaw at his insides from the moment he began patching up the windows of Bunker 1 with red bricks. Guilt, in fact, was about the only genuine feeling left in his crumb-of-a-soul. He could finally stop pretending that he didn't despise Hollywood because of the tainted money he received after the Nuremberg Trials and immediately invested to start up a film production company that afforded all of *them* a lavish lifestyle. He loathed *them* because of *their* Passovers and Sabbaths and Hanukkahs and unconditional love for that same God who abandoned them a long time ago. He hated *their* God. And when *they* agreed upon that absurd slogan—forgive, but never forget—he tried for *their* sake. But who was he fooling? He could never forgive. And he wanted to forget. The only way to accomplish that was to go back and end it the way it should have ended fifty years ago.

Otto had to make two stops before getting onto the plane bound for Bratislava. His first stop was Costume City on Hollywood and Vine where he picked up a fake but so real striped uniform and the most beaten-to-death shoes he could find. Then he headed to the nearest tattoo parlor. He's been cursing himself for years for letting his wife talk him into removing the tattoo from his forearm the minute she found out about laser procedures. After that Otto felt like he'd committed the ultimate betrayal. He walked into the tattoo parlor slowly, looked around, and breathed in the mixture of anxiety and pleasure that lightly soared through the air with the sound of buzzing. The girl at the counter was leafing through a magazine. He wasn't even surprised—nothing could surprise him anymore; he'd seen it

all—at the quantity of silver piercings her fragile body hoarded, and when he told her that he had an appointment, she laughed, letting a silver ball on her tongue glisten in the neon light above her just a little brighter than the crown of her bald head. She looked so familiar, yet so strange. “Jude will take care of you.”

“So. What can I do for ya?” Otto felt a poke in the middle of his back. He raised and dropped his hands in an instantaneous wave, then, for a brief disgraceful moment, he curled his shoulders inward. He moved forward, turned around, and pulled up his left sleeve.

“I want you to put a number here,” Otto ran his fingertips over the outer part of his forearm, gazing into the eyes of a rather large, tattoo-less, at least as far as Otto saw, man in an ivory colored t-shirt that would have completely blended into the color of his skin if the skull-and-bones symbol intruding on his chest wasn’t there.

Jude took Otto by the arm and completely enclosed it with a loose grasp. “I don’t think I’ll be able to do that.”

“Why not?” Otto pulled his arm from the young man’s grasp. “All I want is 124965 in green. Right here,” he ran his fingertips over the outer part of his forearm again. “And I don’t want it perfectly straight. No fancy numbers either. Make it sloppy—as if you’d already tattooed a lot of numbers and your hand is tired.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Jude backed away.

“I’ll pay double.”

Jude shook his head.

“Triple!”

“Let me be totally blunt here. Have you seen a mirror lately? You’re nothing but skin and bones. And I’m not tattooing such shit on you or anyone else!”

“I’m a paying costumer.” Otto wanted to shout, but his voice broke mid-sentence into a silent murmur as his eyes encountered a familiar man in the mirror behind Jude. Otto walked around Jude and faced the mirror, staring. He smiled. Even after all these years he was able to re-create his true self. Only the deep wrinkles added an unfamiliar appearance to his face. But the dark bags under his eyes and the lack of hair, which deserted his head a decade ago, brought back the past. He was satisfied. His months-long diet of

a slice of bread and watery vegetable broth (with an occasional raw potato) a day, and sometimes nothing, reduced his body to the same malnourished man the Red Army found hiding behind the latrines in the spring of 1945.

Otto noticed Jude's reflection rummaging in the cabinet, and when he turned around, Jude stuck one of those pathetic signs WE RESERVE THE RIGHT TO REFUSE SERVICE TO ANYONE in front of Otto's face.

"Have it your way," Otto shrugged his thin shoulders, "but I'm taking this." He reached behind Jude and seized a green permanent marker from the cup on the counter. The over-pierced girl tried to grab him by the arm, but Jude stopped her.

Otto set his suitcase onto the wooden bench next to him. The sudden adrenaline rush he experienced when he stood, for the first time in fifty-three years, in front of the house he and his parents used to live in could have made his blood pump with longing or anger or sorrow, but his mostly skeletal body didn't have to worry about fighting the attack of such emotions. Otto was calloused. He entered. He couldn't recognize anything or anyone. The cozy living room he remembered was now filled with drunks spilling beer onto the wooden tables, waitresses with bosoms hanging out of their blouses, and filthy footprints all over the floor. His past had been ravished.

Otto caught the first train to Poland. He felt uncomfortable on the cushioned seats. He stood up. He wanted the experience to be like before. Finally, after blankly staring out of the window for several hours, he was able to go back. He could feel the pain shooting up his legs, the sweat dripping down his back as the temperature inside the car rose with every heart-beat that surrounded him. He could smell the foul breath of dry, thirsty mouths, the urine, feces. He could hear the moans and cries and prayers. His eyes were closed, but he could feel the rays of sun gently nudging his eyelids through the gaps between the wooden planks on the windows, as if their warm touch was to be the last warmth he'd ever feel.

"Where are they taking us, Otto?" someone tugged on his sleeve. Otto turned around. He exhaled with surprise, gazing at his young friend, Milo. Milo's eyes lost the fire they burned with three days ago when he and Otto got arrested for protesting Tiso's deal with Hitler. *Five hundred Reich Marks for one Slovak Jew's life, Milo. Can you believe that?* Otto asked his friend then.

But Otto was wrong. He realized that later. Much later. Tiso didn't offer to pay five hundred Reich Marks for every Slovak Jew's life. He paid for death. How could anyone put a price tag on a human being? Otto often wondered. But Jews weren't considered human. They were vermin, pesky vermin that wasn't even worthy of the exterminator's call. The final solution was to send the vermin to the exterminator.

"Otto, can you hear me?" Milo waved his hand in front of Otto's face.

Otto nodded.

"Where are they taking us?"

Otto shrugged, shaking his head; then, he pressed his face against the wooden planks, peering out through the gaps. He inhaled the outside air, swallowing the long-craved freshness and oxygen. It made his body shiver. His eyes were blinded by all the whiteness glistening in the sun, but after a while they began searching the surroundings. There was nothing that looked familiar. The train didn't pass any stations or platforms or signs for quite some time. Twice Otto spotted a small forest, but the snow-covered trees stood like ghosts in the void—quiet, motionless, frozen. He turned around, leaned against the wall, and tried to sleep.

The train finally halted with a screech, but no one opened the door. A rush of panic mingled with the feeling of uncertainty, whizzing among all the paid-for-bodies as they began thumping on the walls of the car.

"Where are we, Otto? Can you see anything?"

Otto turned toward the wall of the car and pressed his face against the wooden planks again. He couldn't see anything but snowflakes peacefully descending through the night, illuminated by a bright yellow light from somewhere above. He stuck his tongue out through one of the gaps to catch the snow like he used to do with Milo when they were children. And when the first snowflakes, probably the last ones of the season, melted on the tip of his tongue, the doors of the car opened. Otto was pulled into a whirl of people trying to get out. He fell into a dizzy spell as his blurry eyes caught a glimpse of the SS standing alongside the platform, with guns pointed, dogs barking. He inhaled as much of the cold night's air as he could and when it was his turn to get off the train, he tripped over a stiff infant and fell to the ground.

"Careful there." Otto felt two strong hands lifting him up. He dusted

his pants and looked directly into the eyes of a handsome, young man. They were so brilliantly blue, like the sapphire earrings Otto's mother was buried with in 1939. After that, it was just Otto and his father against the world. The man smiled. "You stumbled right there," he motioned toward the train's steps. "Are you alright?" A blonde lock of hair snuck out from underneath his hat, and Otto took a step back when his eyes absorbed those flawlessly Aryan features.

"I'm... I'm not ready yet," Otto stuttered. "Not yet."

The man raised his eyebrows and leaned closer to Otto.

"Please, not yet," Otto's eyes widened as he prepared to flee. After a few leaps, he heard the man shouting behind him: "Your suitcase!" Otto turned around, grabbed his suitcase, then, disappeared into the crowd of people getting off the train.

He walked as fast as he could. He slipped a few times on the muddy patches from the melting snow, but he didn't mind. He didn't even wipe his hands off; he just picked up his suitcase and continued on. His stomach quivered with excitement and anticipation. He was almost there.

Otto's sensations drowned at the bottom of his gut when he spotted the edge of the village he used to pass daily between 1942 and 1943. Once he even saw it on TV. He remembered it so vividly. The back of the church, the stable, and six white houses enclosed by a brown picket fence ignored his presence, but Otto couldn't ignore theirs. He wanted to feel an enormous urge to barge into the fourth house and break down the door of a woman he saw in a 1975 documentary made for the 30th anniversary of the Holocaust survivors' liberation. Otto swore he would never watch anything that even mentioned the word Holocaust, especially after the movement of those idiots who tried to convince everyone that such a thing never happened. But when he walked into the living room on that forsaken day in 1975, he saw his wife sitting across from a voluptuous woman leaning against a rake. Even though the two were separated by the coffee table and the TV's glowing glass, he felt the woman's presence as a physical intrusion, evoking his past. The woman's cold eyes looked directly at Otto. "The smell was awful," she said. "The ashes even covered our roof-tops. We knew they were killing them. Everyone knew." Otto couldn't sleep for weeks after that. He knew deep down inside that people weren't as clueless as they pretended

to be. They were insensitive. Careless. He knew that everyone knew. He saw the fighter planes, dozens of them, crossing the sky above Auschwitz several times a week. He always prayed that they would drop a bomb, ending everyone's suffering at once. But they didn't. They didn't care. No one cared.

Otto spit in the mud and cursed the woman in the fourth house. He wasn't going to waste his thoughts on her. He had to focus. He was almost there. He lowered his head and counted steps. He knew exactly how far he had to go. The path was engraved into his memory and into the ground. Not even the snow, the mud, or the grass could cover it up.

There.

Otto stopped, raised his head, and looked around. It was gone. Otto panicked. Why was it gone? He set his suitcase down. He walked around the perimeter of where the Little Red House used to be. He held his arm out, fingertips fidgeting in the air, hoping to make contact with the red brick walls. But there was nothing. Nothing. Otto sat down, shivering. March 17th, he thought. Like last time. After that days and weeks and months and years would become a blur, like the sun he watched bleeding into the horizon behind the bare trees trying to hide his past.

He had to go back. He must be able to go back. Otto opened his suitcase. He spread the sleeping bag onto the driest patch of grass he could find. The sleeping bag was a luxury, but he had to bring it. He didn't know how long it would take him to go back. He had to survive until that one precise moment when he died inside. Otto took off his clothes and pulled a potato bag over his body. He used to find whatever he could to keep the cold wind from seeping through the raggedy clothes. He put the striped uniform on over the bag. The beaten-to-death shoes he picked up at the costume store didn't fit him; he'd have blisters in no time, but that's how he wanted it.

Before going to sleep, Otto collected a handful of snow into the tin cup he brought, and ate it. He would save the two loafs of bread for later. Then he took out the green permanent marker from his suitcase and wrote 124965 onto the outer part of his left forearm. Satisfied, he tucked himself into the sleeping bag and dozed off, guarded by the stars.

"Wake up, Otto, wake up. They're coming!" Otto felt his body being pulled up. "Stand straight, Otto. Don't look them in the eye."

Otto rubbed his eyes. It was Milo. And around him more men in striped

uniforms, everyone with a blank stare in their eyes, as if their souls had vanished, and their bodies ran on fear of the unknown. Their movements were automatic, lining them up in front of the wooden bunk-beds, waiting. The door of Bunker 18 opened with a creak, admitting four SS. They were whispering, scanning the striped line with their indifferent eyes.

“Du, du und du. Hier!” one of them shouted, pointing toward the door. Three young men lined up on the assigned spot. Otto could hear his heart pounding against his ribcage. His throat swelled up under the pressure of a hardening knot, and when the SS pointed to him, he walked to the door without hesitation. Milo joined him, with about fifty other young men.

“Kommen sie mit uns!” One of the SS shouted and began shoving them out of the door with his baton.

“Schneller, Juden, schneller!” shouted another one. With guns pointed at them, the group of young men passed the *Arbeit Macht Frei* gate, and after a two kilometers’ walk, they arrived at a little red farm house.

Otto listened carefully but didn’t quite understand what the orders were. Finally, Milo translated that they are to divide the house into two rooms, cut out two small windows just underneath the roof, patch up the rest of windows and doors with red bricks, and fix one outside door so that it is airtight. Otto looked around and saw bricks and cement and nails and hammers and shovels...more than enough weapons to kill the four SS. But no one seemed to have the same thought. Or did they? Otto grabbed a shovel...

...and began mixing the cement.

When the house was to the SS’ satisfaction, the young men were ordered to dig. The soil was still frozen, and it was difficult to dig as deep as the SS wanted. But after several days of sweat-and-blood labor, the deep and wide rectangular hole for an unknown purpose was done, lurking into the night like an open jaw of extreme proportions, expecting, awaiting, yawning impatiently. Otto had no idea what the hole was for. Nor did Milo when he asked him. But they found out soon enough when the SS marched them in front of the Little Red House one morning and made them open the sealed door for the very first time.

They fell out like potatoes from a bag.

Naked, with frantic expressions on their faces, eyes bulging out, as if

they didn't understand. Why them? Otto stared in disbelief at the hundreds of them being carried out of the Little Red House, stacked like planks of wood, stiff and frightened. One of the SS came up to Otto and began shouting orders. Otto only heard a murmur of voices dashing through his mind: *Help us, Otto. Look what they've done, Otto.* Otto looked at the pile of bodies, encountering their eyes begging him to avenge them. He was petrified, disgusted, appalled, but only until he felt the barrel of the SS' gun on his back and a loud shout in his ear: "Verstehst du, Jude?" Otto lost his balance as the shout penetrated his ear drum, weakening his knees, sending his absent-minded body to the ground.

"Wir verstehen," Milo answered with a voice that didn't belong to him, catching Otto just before he hit the ground. Otto nodded a brief thank you when his body regained its equilibrium; then, for the very first time, he touched death.

At first he tried working with his eyes partly closed so that he could reduce the reality that surrounded him. Perceiving everything through a veil of his eyelashes seemed like a bad dream he would soon wake up from. But when he repeatedly stumbled over the dead bodies, he had to open his eyes. He felt a sickening nausea whirling in his stomach every time he landed among the corpses. He wanted to avenge them. But how? There was nothing he could do. He faced choiceless choices. He felt like he betrayed his people, and he wished to die. Otto disobeyed orders and did whatever he could to be shot by the SS, but his punishment was never death. Only severe beating and later a bloody sterilization by Mengele. Finally, when Milo told him that he couldn't die so easily, because he was now the member of the Sonderkommando, Otto gave up. He gave up thinking, feeling, hoping. Eventually, Otto's lifting of the dead by their feet, Milo's by the arms, carrying them to the hole, and dropping them into its hungry pit became a routine. Otto's mind only exhibited a sense of awareness when he carried the dead out of the Little Red House. He thought he recognized some of them. But they looked so different. The only wish left in him was to never find his father among these poor souls. But would he even recognize him?

Otto woke up to the singing of birds. He no longer had to use his sleeping bag. A thin blanket was enough. The sun was often so warm Otto was tempted to take off his striped shirt. But he didn't. He knew that

without it, he would have trouble getting to that moment he yearned for all these wasted years. He walked ever so gently over the meadow in which he covered all those bodies fifty-three years ago. He did not want to disturb them. He wanted to join them. Soon. Very soon. He could feel it though he had lost sense of time. It must have been June, perhaps even July. Otto didn't know. His body was weak. He ran out of bread a long time ago. It seemed like a long time. All he relied on now was grass, mushrooms, and berries from the nearby forest, and the water from the man-made pond which he thought looked ridiculously ironic. It was placed in the very same spot the fires used to burn, as if it was meant to extinguish the hell of the past.

Otto ate what he could find, drank, then, crawled back to his blanket. His body used to be so resilient all those years ago. Now, in his seventies, his body didn't have the means to battle extreme conditions as it used to. Otto knew that, and he was grateful that he made it this long. He could sense that the awaited moment was near. He felt it. He knew it. He traced the number on his left forearm and waited, breathing in the scent of flowers in full bloom, looking directly into the sun.

The brightness and the heat were unbearable. But it was something he could deal with. What he couldn't stand was the smell. The earth was swollen, with gases escaping upward, burping, as if it wanted to belch out all that was hiding within it. The Sonderkommando walked around in a daze, stopping every so often by a bush or a tree, vomiting. The four SS didn't even bother shouting or whipping the weak men; they were too preoccupied with covering their faces. One of the SS came over and passed out rags to the Sonderkommando; each member immediately covered their noses and mouths, but the stench still penetrated the raggedy cloth.

Otto and Milo dug alongside each other. It was by far the worst, most revolting job the SS ordered them to do. The bodies putrefied in the ground all spring and when summer came, the decayed corpses avenged themselves in the only way they could. The Sonderkommando pulled them out of the ground one at a time, stacking them, or whatever was left of them, onto wooden carts, pulling them to the blazing fire. Otto was horrified. The flesh often separated from the bone when he tried to lift the dead with his shovel; the earth was full of blood, mold, and odd grimaces on the rotten, distorted faces. He tried not to pay attention to them.

Otto felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around and met the eyes of one of the SS. He didn't find the usual cold, loathing look he was so used to. The SS' eyes were filling up with tears. But did he cry because of Otto's people, or did his eyes just react to the intensity of the greatest fire Otto has ever seen? There was no way to tell. The SS had the rest of his face covered with a mask. Without any orders or explanations, the SS passed his flask to Otto. Otto hesitated a moment, but then he took a long, deep drink, letting the gin fill his mouth. He returned the flask, and the SS delivered it to the next member of the Sonderkommando.

The fire burned eternally and still, there were more and more bodies to be pulled from the earth. The ashes blinded the sun, the SS, and the Sonderkommando; they covered the roof of the Little Red House as it stood in silence, gazing at the commotion going on in front of it, tired, dirty, worn out. Eventually, even the SS lent a hand in the endless cremation.

Otto was praying for it to be over, but it could never be over. He would be marched back to Auschwitz, and he'd continue his gruesome job in the newly built crematoria. Till when? Till there were no more Jews left in the world? And when the Sonderkommando was done burning all the dead, would they be next? Otto's mind was suddenly whirling with questions. The uncertainty of his future petrified him. Don't think, Otto, just work, he said to himself. He lowered the shovel into the ground and lifted a body onto the cart next to him. He tried not to look at it, but some unseen force pulled his sight toward the dead man covered in mud. Otto examined the decomposed features. The man could be Otto's father. No. Otto couldn't tell. It was too difficult to tell. Any of the dead men could be his father. But they surely weren't. Otto's father is somewhere in hiding. But what if he isn't? He must be. Otto will find him after the war. What if he doesn't survive the war? What if he never sees his father again? What if his father thinks Otto is dead? *We will all die here.* Otto heard the dead man's voice in his head. *Come with me, Son.* It was his father. Wasn't it?

Otto took off his shoes and the striped uniform. He laid his weak, tired, and famished body into the grass. He closed his eyes and his feelings of guilt and betrayal sunk deep into the ground beneath him. He no longer feared the unknown, for there was only one thing certain in life—death. Otto waited for his.

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YAZMIN WHEELLOCK: “Jackie & Cruz” contains a lot of elements from the types of neighborhoods I grew up in. Although no characters are based on real people, the characters in the story hold many character traits of the people that I observed through my own living room window.

PAULA WRIGHT has her MFA from the University of Wyoming. During the spring of 2010, she travelled to Argentina to research the grassroots style of eco-poetics and ecopolitics found there. These poems are all translated from the artists and activists she met during her travels.