

PENUMBRA

2015



Volume 25

The Annual Art and Literary Journal
of
California State University, Stanislaus

Penumbra (pi-num 'bre): *n.* 1. A partial shadow, as in an eclipse, between regions of complete shadow and complete illumination. 2. The partly darkened fringe around a sun spot. 3. An outlying, surrounding region; periphery; fringe. [Lat. paene, almost – Lat. unbra, shadow]

ALL ABOUT PENUMBRA

Since 1991, *Penumbra* has proudly published poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and visual art by contributors from the Stanislaus region, from throughout the U.S., and from abroad. Our staff is composed entirely of students: they make all editorial decisions—which submissions to accept, how to design and format the journal, etc.—as well as selling all the advertising space.

We have no aesthetic or political agenda; we accept the best submissions we get, based on democratic deliberations. Because new students staff the journal each year, *Penumbra's* look and contents are always evolving. If one reads two volumes, he or she will read two unique publications - every year has its own theme and style.

Annually, we launch the new issue with a reading on the CSU, Stanislaus campus, usually near the beginning of May. These readings provide writers and artists with an excellent opportunity to share their work with a supportive audience.

English 4019: *Editing Literary Magazines* is offered to students with junior (or higher) academic standing, possessing an interest in publishing. The course is offered every Spring as an upper-division English course, but the class isn't just beneficial to English majors—it's also beneficial to art, communications, and business majors. A huge part of *Penumbra* is marketing, which involves communicating with businesses in the area, communicating with authors and artists that submit their work, and generating funds for *Penumbra* each year by selling the magazine, ads, and coming up with fun events that could potentially generate revenue. The designing of the magazine is equally important as a Book-Design team is selected to decide on *Penumbra's* new look for that year. English 4019 gives students the chance to gain experience in fields that they may plan on working in once they graduate, which is part of what makes the class such a unique course to the CSU Stanislaus campus.

Acknowledgments

Penumbra has been the literary and artistic journal of California State University, Stanislaus for the past 25 years.

This publication would not be possible without the hard work, dedication, and artistic vision of our Editor-in-Chief, Noel Patton.

We would like to also thank Dr. Jesse Wolfe for his guidance throughout the production process of *Penumbra* 2015.

Our staff would like to thank Claremont Print and Copy, Inc. for their exemplary work and support.

Penumbra would like to give special thanks to Jessica Dickman, Noel Daniel, and Chad Hunter for providing advice, support, and much of their time in helping to bring the journal to life.

Our gratitude and thanks also go to the English Department for being the foundation from which *Penumbra* has grown.

We are grateful to the Art Department for partnering with us, and we hope to continue our alliance for many years to come.

We would like to extend our thanks to those not mentioned for continuous support throughout this entire process, as well as our readers: your interest has been vital to us.

Cover Art:

Once Upon a Night

Painted by Danyl Crites

Image courtesy of Canvas and Cabernet, LLC

All rights revert to the contributors. Davy Jones is the intellectual property of The Walt Disney Company. *Penumbra* is indexed in the Humanities International Index. Content © 2015.

Penumbra
Department of English
California State University, Stanislaus
One University Circle
Turlock, CA 95382

Donors

Penumbra would like to thank the following generous donors who have made the publication of this literary and art journal possible:

Susan & Bellos Nisan

Family of Joan Jackson-Collins

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

The Wolfe family

Paul & Gina Machado

And an extra special thank you to Canvas and Cabernet for their generosity and support.

PENUMBRA STAFF

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Jesse Wolfe

Editor-in-Chief

Noel Patton

Penumbra Club

President - Noel Patton

Vice President - Christina Abdou

Secretary/Event Coordinator - Janelle Triplett

Treasurer - Anthony Valencia

Book Design

Mariah Esparza

Katie Mackey

Hayley Perry

Jordan Severns - **Managing Design Editor**

Alex Villaescusa

Editing

Danyl Crites- **Executive Editor**

Mariela Gonzalez

Amy Machado - **Managing Editor**

Jessica Moilanen

Ashlee Shaffer

Marketing

CJ Chaney – **Artist Liaison**

Micah Hayden

Caleb Porter

Bryce Prater

Veronica Pulido

Anthony Valencia

Table of Contents

Penumbras	1
Love	2
I'm Falling Asleep in Class	3
Inhale	4
Wasted Lipstick	5
Remembrance	6
Basil, Pasta, a Little Mozzarella	7
My Heart is a Distant Planet	11
Taking Off Her Jeans	12
Concerns About the Cake	13
The Visit	14
Sitting Alone	15
Never Because of Him	16
The Happiness Machine	17
Splatter	20
Lunar Love Letter	21
The Acts of Love	22
Mourning Memories	25
Terror	26
Wallflower Syndrome	27
The Finisher	28
My Autobiography	31
Millennials	32
Bakery	33
Coffee Talk	34
Death is A Midnight Runner	35
Cosmic Keys	36
Bottomless Pit	37
Contradictions	38
How to Spend a Trust Fund in Three Years	39
Coin Slot	40
Grace	41
Mywitness News at Seven	42
My Portrait at Sixty-Two	43
Overgrown	44
It Was Late and We Stopped Talking, But We Didn't Hang Up	45

Table of Contents

The Communard's Prayer	46
Characters	48
A Letter to the Gravity I've Gained	49
I Will Endure	50
Mind the Gaps	51
To the Friend Who Asked if I'm Still Going to Their House	52
Public Display of Erection	53
S.Z. Leaves for Vietnam (1964)	56
Please Excuse this Sex Poem	57
My Shadow	58
Local News	59
Come to Play	60
Door	61
Loose	62
Misleading Poem	63
In an Elevator on Wall Street	64
Communion of Suffering	65
Christina's Break	66
Steamed	67
Human-beings' Prime Desires	68
Penance	69
Creatures	70
Untitled	71
The Battle for 5 a.m.	72
This and of That	73
How to be Perfect	74
Hospital Visit	75
Waking Up	76
July	77
The Letter	78
Remember	79
The Homeless Are not in My View	80
Welfare	81
Artifacts	82
Intellectual Attraction	84
World Music	85

Table of Contents

Keyboards	86
Practice	87
To the Muse	88
Like Silencing the Wind	89
English Practice II	90
Teach Me to Draw	91
Adoption	92
Musing	93
Victor Poem	94
Poison	95
Auction	97
Nightfall	98
On View at the 9/11 Memorial Museum	99
Normandy, The Impossible Made Possible	100
Think Of Me	101
Gold in a Grave	103
17	104
The Last Eclipse	105
Disruption	108
Those Banyan Trees	109
Mendocino Silver Haze	110
The Cows Gaze Out in Unison	111
I Watch the Sunset	112
Shadow and Quay	113
The Fringe	114
What it Takes to Watch a Mushroom Sprout up out of Nowhere	115
Living Through an Off Day	116
What I Want from You	117
Rickety	118
At Stake	119
I Thought She was Fire	120
Evolution	121
The Monster on my Floor	122
Murder Mystery	124
Davy Jones	125
Dear Mother	126

Table of Contents

My Mother's Funeral	128
Broken	129
Mother's Day	130
Lullaby for the Damned	131
Red Inside	132
Habits	135
Migrant Mothers	136
My Father, King Kong	137
High Anxiety	138
Doomed from "I Do"	139
Untitled	143
Comfort	144
Naming Ritual	145
Wicked Stepsister	146
Flesh	149
Camp for Girls	150
Thrill Ride	151
San Francisco	153
My Relationship with Novél	155
Time Bans the Word "Feminist"	158
Night Owl	159
Word Born	162
Two Weeks of the Terrible Threes	163
The Other Side Unfiltered	164

Penumbras

When two penumbras overlap
their shadows attract
and merge;
swell and surge toward
one another like

you and me,
opaque objects
overlaid with desire
to connect and grow
beyond separate silhouettes.

But we're scared to reveal
what down deep
we feel so
hemming and hawing.
We search for

predawn rays of—
I dig your smile,
that's a nice dress,
you're such a good dancer,
you move really well.

Then passing between
the sun
and the moon,
we avert an eclipse,
we light up the room.

Love

I decided I hated you today.
Hate is such a strong word.
It is like saying I want
to murder you, to eliminate you.
I will never understand
how love can change
so quickly, how it
can morph into something
as strong as hate.
But it has.
And do not
dare tell me
that it is
solely my fault.
I
fought
like
hell.

I'm Falling Asleep in Class

I'm falling asleep in class—
eyes are closing,

heavy,
burning.

But it's worth it—
the staying up late,
flirting,

kissing,
loving.

It's worth it to feel him,
to hear him murmur in my ear—

"I love you"
"oh god"
"fuck"

To lay beside him,
playing with his hair,
feeling his breath slow
as sleep claims him.

To come to the realization,
as terrifying as it is,
that "oh shit"
I love him.

It's worth it to realize
that no matter what is said,
no matter what people think,
no matter what is against you

No matter what—
two people can fall in love despite everything
hopelessly,
deeply, finally.

Inhale

Over time I realized that
my breaths were getting deeper,
fuller, more desperate,
not because of the fall-

but because you filled up all the
empty caverns inside me.
You have made your home
in the spaces between my ribs
and now I am breathing for two.

Wasted Lipstick

You're not worth the wasted lipstick
The uncertainty is getting old
If you're down for playing games, then I'll just walk away and fold
I want to throw in the towel, call it a day
No more cat and mouse game, now you can just watch me walk away
Is that what you want? I'll be the one that got away
The one you dream about, scream about, cringe when you think about
You'll regret it one day
The one that was always there, always sacrificing, never judging
I guess you took it for granted, but when we were in the moment, I wasn't
You're not worth the bitter tears, my mascara runs cold
You're not worth the wasted lipstick
The uncertainty is getting old.

Remembrance



Basil, Pasta, a Little Mozzarella

It took from the time he kissed her on the back of the neck while she waited for the water to boil, and the two minutes for the fresh pound of spaghetti to cook, adding in the uncounted minutes while they brought silverware, plates, and salad to the table, plus a couple of minutes for the pasta and meat sauce to be passed—along with the garlic bread—before Tony noticed that his wife’s wedding band was missing. “Your ring?” He twirled his fork into his spoon. “You leave it by the sink?”

Marie sometimes did that, purposefully forgetting to slip it back on after washing a greasy pan. “Nope. Not by the sink, not anymore.” She lifted a mix of pasta and sauce and expertly wrapped it around her fork, replacing her spoon on her plate.

She passed the salad. The platter was rimmed with plum tomatoes sliced in half, the tomato alternating with marble-sized, fresh mozzarella balls and purple basil, drizzled with olive oil and freshly ground salt and pepper. In the small kitchen in their Philadelphia row house, Marie had stood at the chipped porcelain kitchen sink and made the *Insalata Caprese*, allowing the flavors to mingle while she gazed out at the vacant alley. The dish was a circle of red, white, and purple, with faint green oil dripping around the edges, topped with black pepper flecks. She used purple instead of green basil, like her mother used to make for her father.

Tony speared straight through a basil leaf, mozzarella ball, and plum tomato half. Before taking the bite off his fork he asked, again, “I don’t get it. Where’s your ring?”

“I decided to leave it off,” she said.

“I can see.”

Marie waved another wound forkful of dinner, this time poking the air at eye-level. “Something wrong?”

“You upset? With me?” He scratched the hair behind his ear for a moment. “I do something?”

“No. You didn’t do anything.” Her voice was clear. “Not a thing.”

“So, honey.” Tony proceeded cautiously, like when he was brought onto a job where the original contractor had laid out the frame wrong. “You took your ring off. For the moment? For the evening? For what?”

“I wanted to see what it felt like.”

He shook the oil and vinegar and poured it on his salad. He chewed.

Marie stabbed her own trio of basil, mozzarella, and tomato. Holding it off to the side, she said, “I wanted to remember what it was like to not wear a ring. Not to have an indentation in my ring finger when I slipped it off to wash the dishes.” She took the forkful and savored the fresh blend. Swallowing, she said, “To be like you.”

“That’s what this is about?” He nodded as if he should have picked up the message earlier: that this resonated with what he’d been told to look out for. “You’re upset because I’m not wearing a ring? Jesus!” Tony took a bite. “After three years, you’re suddenly upset? I don’t get it.”

“Not all of a sudden.” Marie brushed her dark brown hair behind her shoulders and swiped a hunk of garlic bread into the sauce on her plate. “I looked at the ring by the side of the sink—I was rinsing the basil—and thought it would fit nicely in my jewelry box. So I tucked it away.”

They reached and chewed while Marie thought about how she'd been reminded of her mother when making the *Caprese*. Her mother—who would have been fifty-one today—lying in a hospital bed with her ring so loose she handed it to Marie for safekeeping. “Never thought I’d want to take my ring off,” her mother had said, taking time to catch her breath between words. “But your father, now, he never put one on and he was just as married as I was. I suppose.”

Her mother’s “I suppose” had settled in the recesses of Marie’s mind ever since her marriage to Tony. Preparing dinner earlier this evening, she’d inhaled the intoxicating bouquet of purple basil leaves: the aroma suggesting green basil infused with a whiff of lemon, their scents intertwined like lovers. Along with the tantalizing basil molecules, doubt rose.

“Anyway,” Marie said, as though no time had passed, “I’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

“Since we’ve been married?” Tony pushed a chunk of garlic bread around his plate faster than usual, collecting errant olive oil mixed with pepper, sauce and bits of cheese. “You’ve been upset for three years and now you want to talk?”

“No, not all of the time.” She smiled as if there was humor in her statement; he did not return the smile. “Besides I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You want me to wear a ring? Is that it?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But that’s what this is about.” Tony’s brown eyes stared for a moment at his wife. Then he nodded. “Sure. I can get a ring if that’s what you want.”

“Not so much.”

“What do you want, then?” he said.

“What I’m doing. No ring. We can be equals this way.”

“Was there something on *Oprah* about wearing rings?”

“No. Me, hon. It’s what I want.”

“Don’t I get a say?” he said.

“Did you ask me if I wanted you to wear a ring when we got married?” She placed her left hand on the table and looked at it. “I don’t remember it working that way.”

“But you wanted a ring. You showed it off,” he protested, staring at his wife’s bare ring finger. “It didn’t come up. It’s not like I said I *wouldn’t* wear a ring. I didn’t get one, that’s all.”

“That was fine, then. Today I took my ring off. I’m okay with that.” Marie looked at Tony’s ringless hands, placed on either side of his empty dinner plate.

“Is our marriage in some kind of trouble?” He searched his mind for what he might have done and not known he’d done it.

“Not that I know of.” She shrugged.

They cleared the dishes and put away the leftovers, catching up on what transpired at work, and their limited possibilities to advance. Marie lifted the remaining pasta out of the serving dish with one scoop and plopped the stuck-together mass into a resealable plastic bowl. Tony poured the sauce on top, found a lid and placed the container in the fridge. He washed and she dried, ‘till the plates and glasses, silverware and serving ware, were done.

“What makes you so upset about my being ringless?” Marie said, as they headed down their front stoop steps for an after dinner walk.

“Nothing. I don’t know what you’re trying to prove.”

“What do you prove?” she said. “Other than that you might or might not be married?”

“So it is about me.” He nodded, as if it had become clear.

“Of course it’s about you, but it’s also about me. Why should I make a declaration you’re not willing to make? I choose the same as you. That should only bother if you’ve been getting some advantage—privilege even—by not wearing a ring. And you don’t want me to have the same, um, opportunities you have.” Marie looked over at him as they got to the base of their steps and headed down the street.

Tony reached his right hand over to hold Marie’s left while they walked. He could almost feel the empty space from her ring finger and found himself rubbing his left ring finger with his thumb, caressing the smooth unmarked skin. As if he knew he shouldn’t proceed but was being forced to forge ahead anyway, a few blocks later he said, “Jesus, honey, I’m not looking for some ‘advantage.’ How can you think I’m not as committed?”

“Your word. Committed.”

“It’s not that.” He thought about his brothers, his brothers-in-law, his father, his father-in-law, his friends. No wedding rings between them. “Nobody wears a ring. You know that.”

At an intersection where row houses gave way to small family-run businesses, they crossed to the side of the narrow street with Gino’s Homemade Pasta Shop. They rushed past the plate glass window and the gallery of glass jars teeming with dried pasta. They stood in the doorway and turned to each other, oblivious as newlyweds to those around them. Satisfied customers, clutching fresh pasta and mozzarella, waited not so patiently to pass, and then pushed around the couple.

Giggling and as confident as when she’d been unmarried, Marie said, “Now your wife doesn’t wear one, either.”

“Wait a minute.” He pulled her gently toward him and kissed her on the lips—noting that she lifted her head and kissed back like she was as eager as he was for more. “Follow me.” He took her hand and they walked into Gino’s. At the counter, he scanned the fresh pasta in the refrigerator, the cooked tortellini, the golf-ball sized meatballs warming in the display counter along one aisle. He kept looking ‘till he saw it, cooked but off to the side: *Giganti Rigatoni*.

He pointed. “Two *Rigatoni*, please.”

“Two? Two? You want two pounds?” The man behind the counter gestured with his hands, trying to clarify the order.

“No, two *Rigatoni*. The *Giganti*. That’s it,” Tony said.

“Tony, wait,” Marie protested. “This isn’t a game.” She smiled though, and leaned into him.

“I know, but I got it figured.” He took the slightly rigid *Giganti Rigatoni* from the counter man who handed it to him with no charge and a shake of the head.

The counter man opened his arms, and said, “It’s *al dente*,” as if elucidating all the mysteries of married life.

Outside the shop, they scanned the shapes and sizes in the window display, from spaghetti to orecchiette, ravioli, and fusilli. Colors ranged from white with a hint of yellow to orange, green, red, and black.

Tony grinned at Marie and took her hands softly in his. “I take this *Rigatoni* because I want to wear a *Rigatoni*.” He pushed one of the round, band-like, slightly firm, pieces of pasta onto his ring finger.

She tried to be serious; however, lightness overtook her. “*Rigatoni* I can wear. At least tonight.” She placed the other pasta on her ring finger and reached her right hand out to her husband.

Bound together by the warmth of their hands—and the paste that formed where his pasta ring melded their fingers together—they headed home. At their front stoop he stopped in front of her.

Marie eyed her pasta, as she’d done with the half-carat he’d given her as a token of their marriage. She rotated the back of her outstretched hand one way, then another, as if flour and water might sparkle if it hit the evening light at the right angle.

She leaned back, supported by his strength, with her arms around the outsides of his shoulders. He leaned back, depending on her strength. Marie inhaled the intoxicating bouquet of mutual dependence and independence.

Their scents intertwined. Lovers, *al dente*.

* * *

My Heart is a Distant Planet

My heart is a distant planet
far from the madness here.

My hands remain,
do what they can do,

but my heart took off
and never looked back.

My lips speak,
say what they can say,

but my heart left behind
everything it held dear

and flew years ago
across the galaxies,

landing in the dark
of an uncharted system

My heart is a distant planet
and some nights I feel it,

a small tug of gravity
when I'm almost asleep,

and I ask it in prayer,
"Can you please come home?"

and I tell it in prayer,
"I miss you so much,"

but I don't get an answer
and my mind returns here

to shouts, screams,
cries of agony,

endless savagery,
and the wind whistling

through my empty chest.
My heart is gone for good

Taking Off Her Jeans

Taking off her jeans
was the most sensual moment
of my life.
Though I don't remember
where we were
or her name;
nor can I remember
if it was winter outside
or some other season;
afternoon or twilight
or dark.
I also can't remember
if it was last week or
a long time ago.
And I'm not sure if
I still know her
or if we lost touch
long before the Internet, Facebook, Twitter.
But what I do remember
is taking off her jeans
and she allowing
a complete stranger
(or were we already lovers?)
to watch her thighs
rising up like an arch;
and her sharing with me
(whoever it is I am now
or was then),
herself.
Like two explorers
on a quest,
arriving at the same exact time
to the place
we both so longed to experience
as if for the very first time;
or as if it was
for always.

Concerns About the Cake

Frank had never tasted buttercream that brought tears to his eyes. So when he said “I have concerns about the cake” it was from a place in his head that had nothing to do with his heart.

Frank was like that— always trying to find the logic in the illogical; always trying to write a proof to justify feelings in the way he taught geometry. That’s why some part of him appreciated Lisa. He could not write an equation to solve for trust but he trusted her. She might come home one day with wild pink hair just for fun but it went to a place in him kept just for the occasions of Lisa.

The first time they met he was grading papers outside at the local coffee house. His only nod to the nice weather was a pair of knee length shorts and no socks. He had his back to the sun, and his head down, red pen going a mile a minute—he always wanted his students to show their work. Sometimes they had the right answers for the wrong reasons. Frank had to explain what they’d done wrong or incomplete; and why they were getting half credit.

His rounded shoulders made the perfect brace for Lisa, coming up behind him wearing old-fashioned brown suede shoe skates and wild balance. She bashed into him, whispered a giggling sorry in his ear, and went in to get coffee. Frank was left to contemplate the long red stripe across one paper and how to react.

When she came out, a bit more composed and contrite, holding two coffees, Frank didn’t care that it wasn’t exactly the way he liked it. He moved his papers aside and invited her to sit. That day marked the beginning of a gentle, yet monumental shift in the formerly precise and exacting Frank.

There were some things that just couldn’t change, and Lisa respected that. The toothpaste had to be parallel to the sink on the right side, not the left; and even though she craved light, the blackout shades on one side of the bedroom were always down. Frank learned to laugh at himself a little, even as he alphabetized the books Lisa had put away on his shelves. Lisa liked to walk by his desk and move one pencil, just for fun. It was a very easy and sweet mix of personalities: one pliable as new grass, the other thorny as roses. And it was good.

Which is why they decided to have a small celebration. Lisa had a drawer in Frank’s dresser and about three inches in his closet; plus room for a couple pair of shoes and the brown suede roller skates on the closet floor. She traveled light; they were committed; the school year was coming to an end—a whole list of things called for a celebration. Hence the concerns about the cake.

She wasn’t going to make it herself. She wasn’t going to tell him it was called “Princess Cake”**, and she wasn’t going to tell him she *might* color just part of her hair to match the pale green of the frosting. There was nothing for Frank to be concerned about at all. She picked up a pencil and they started making a list of their friends.

**Princess Cake - A European yellow cake layered with pastry cream and raspberry preserves. Frosted with a thin layer of vanilla buttercream, cloaked in green marzipan (almond paste) and decorated with a ribbon swag design adorned with tiny rosettes and daisies.

The Visit

Lying down – my eyelids are closed,
but I am not asleep.

It's past midnight. And
the mood is peaceful.

I feel a sudden wind drift
that gives me a momentary chill.

The creaky floorboards
alert me that someone has entered.

My eyes open wide to an eerily thick
cloak of darkness in my room.

I am on edge,
but I am not afraid.

Deliberate slow-paced footsteps
find their way down the hall.
Whose are they?

I spring up to a sitting position
in my bed
to see a silhouette in the doorway.

This is someone I know.
A one-word question involuntarily whispers
its way through my lips: "Pop?"

A life lived.
A life loved.
A blessing of reassurance.

Sitting Alone



Never Because of Him

It happened the day after. I was alone on my lunch break, sitting at my favorite fountain underneath the shade of one of hundreds of honey locusts as the Eiffel Tower stood in front of me like Anouk Aimée. While I picked out the arugula from my sandwich, I watched two little boys run around their mothers, throwing rocks at one another. The sight of them made me think of him, but I quickly thought of fresh lavender — as I have trained myself to do — and looked up at the highest point of the Eiffel. The tower stands 984 feet, yet it looked out of place that day with its three shades of bronze against the iris colored sky behind it. I was wondering how many times she received a fresh coat of paint and who did such a job when I saw a tiny speck begin to fall from the top platform.

I knew it was a person. I found out later it was a young woman — 29; two years older than me. And I knew that she had killed herself. The only way to fall from the Eiffel Tower is to climb. I put my sandwich down and watched the body fall— rigid and still— rotating slowly forward in a circular motion as her blonde hair bloomed forth like a budding sunflower. Screams started behind me— but I didn't scream because as I watched her body plummet to the Earth, never taking my eyes off of her, I thought of him and how he had broken his promise to meet me. I saw the letter he had written next to the razor that sat on the edge of the bathtub, filled with hot water, candles lit, with my sullenly cliché note beside his. I saw this as clear as I saw the woman hit the ground like a soft tomato.

After the ambulances came and took what was left of her, life had not stopped; only hers had. She had become a whisper in the library of the living. I decided to go home and text my boss on the metro that I would need the afternoon off. She was fine with it. At home, I found his letter, read it one last time, and burned it. Then, I drew a bath.

The Happiness Machine



For Ray Bradbury and my little brother.

“The happiest of people don't necessarily have the best of everything. They just make the most of everything they have.”

Author Unknown

“What is happiness?” my college philosophy teacher asked rhetorically. “Money, health, a fancy car, a thin waistline, a meaningful career, doing for others? As the song says,” he continued, “money can't buy you love. Or happiness. Is happiness getting what you want, or wanting what you've got?”

We, his students and the target of his question, sheepishly looked at each other, our hands, or the ceiling. None of us wanted to volunteer an answer, probably because we really didn't know, perhaps didn't care (it was the Sixties after all), and even more likely because it was our last class before Christmas break. *How could this bozo ask a question like that just before the clock would strike the hour and set us free to happily enjoy our holiday?* I asked myself, echoing his rhetorical.

For me, the answer was always elusive; always just out of reach. When, in fact, it was there the whole time, right in front of me, just waiting for me to see. And when I finally did, it was so obvious.

I always came home for the holidays. “I'll Be Home for Christmas” was my anthem. And Thanksgiving and Easter and Summer. Some of my classmates never went home. I did. And I continued to as an adult. As long as Mom and Dad had a home, I had a place to go. Years later, my then college girlfriend and now my ex-wife would say that our real home was the home we were living in together, not my parent's home or her parent's home; not the “family” home. She was right, of course. But, for me, the stubborn and oppositional child, Modesto and the house on the street next to Pike Park, were always home and would always be.

So, here I was, home from college for Christmas. All my siblings were there, with their significant others; some of whom stuck, some of whom didn't. Gary, my best friend and college roommate, was there with his girlfriend and six-pack of Bud. There were a couple other high school buddies because this was the gathering place. The family room was cozy-warm and smelled of woodsmoke and chocolate chip cookies, cinnamon and pine, beer and cigarettes. Bing Crosby crooned through the ceiling speakers. The egg nog and ribboned hard candy tasted so very sweet. The blanket-draped Naugahyde couch felt soft and familiar. The colored lights glowed on the tree. The mistletoe hung with care. I was in safe harbor and it was good.

I stepped out the family room door onto the small concrete backyard patio to get a breath of fresh air and gaze at the witnessing moon. I turned to look back on the scene inside. The large, segmented, rectangular picture window framed everyone and everything. And there it was. All of it. And it was working. In all its glory. The Happiness Machine. It had been around and running from day one; not always well, but still in operation. Sometimes, it needed tinkering and adjusting and oiling. When it was in tune, it was comforting and reassuring in its perpetual motion. It was

something you could count on. Always, and mostly, when it mattered.

For me, happiness would always be family, friends, and home and my heart would always be there. I realized then, and still believe now, that it wasn't about getting what you want, but wanting what you've got. It wasn't about having what you want, but wanting what you have.

I felt sorry for those who didn't.

“Things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out.”

Art Linkletter, Radio/TV Personality and Author

Splatter



Lunar Love Letter

You enter in darkness
through my bedroom window.

The subtlety of your presence
comforts me.

Your luminous splendor
brings a glow to my face.

I bask in your radiance,
and cuddle in your caress.

Your beams bear a balm
that soothes my soul.

You lull me to sleep
with your heavenly halo.

I slumber deep
as dreams of delight
dance inside my head.

When I awaken you are gone,
but I know you will return.
You always do.

Celestial companion –
keep me near from afar
until night falls again.

Know that I cherish
those coveted moments
you shine your light on me.

The Acts of Love



"It's a young world
When you're in love, you're in a young world."
– *Young World*, Written by Jerry Fuller, Performed by Ricky Nelson

First Love is confusing and exciting. Her name was Jill. We were classmates at Grace M. Davis High School. We spent most of the year together— passing notes, decorating floats, eating lunch, going to games, hanging out at her house. We went to the Christmas formal. I remember smelling her perfume on my sweater during class. It made it hard to concentrate. All I wanted to do was be next to her. My priorities suddenly changed; family and friends and Babe Ruth baseball faded away.

Young Love is gut-wrenching and heart-burning. Her name was Kelly. We were undergrads at UC Davis. I met her in Madrid while I was traveling and she was a foreign exchange student. She was the younger sister of a high school buddy. We spent all my time in Spain together and carried on when we both returned to California— going to movies, doing videos for a class project, riding bikes, studying, hanging out at her apartment. She was in love with someone else. All I wanted to do was hear her laugh. Priorities shifted; family and friends and intramural softball were set aside.

"Remember once before
Hearin' the old folks say
Love's an ageless old rhyme
But now a days you know
The sayin' depends so much on
The kind of woman that you find."
– *Kind Woman*, Written by Richie Furay, Performed by Buffalo Springfield

Good Love Gone Bad is sad. Her name was Angela. We grew up blocks from each other. She was the younger sister of a girl I'd known since elementary school. We re-connected in college, courted, married and moved to San Francisco then Honolulu. We spent a lifetime alone together— dancing at clubs; working and acting out; chasing money, partying, hanging out at the beach. All I wanted to do was get away from her. Our priorities fell apart; family and friends and city softball got lost in the shuffle.

Enduring Love is comforting and reassuring. Her name is Rory. We were both divorced and had returned home to Modesto. She was the younger sister of one of my best friends— I obviously have a thing about younger sisters. She had two sons; I had no children. We spent time together and moved in together. Then we married. Travelling, raising her children, taking classes, volunteering, hanging out at home. All I wanted to do was be alone with her. Priorities transformed; family and friends and senior softball were welcome again.

The many acts of love. It's a wonderful feeling. It's a confusing feeling. It's a hollow feeling. It's a contented feeling. I hope I always feel that way.

"At last
My love has come along
My lonely days are over
And life is like a song."

– *At Last*, Written by Mark Gordon and Harry Warren, Performed by Etta James

Mourning Memories

The glitter from the night before was still smattered across her face
Unruly freckles
That wouldn't decide
Whether they would stay in one place
Or not
Her edgy smoky eyes were smudged beyond repair
Her dress clung to her
Sticky like spilt champagne
She opened her eyes to morning
Remembering
That the sun had risen
The world had spun
It was her turn to wake up
She peeled pieces of the night off her
They fluttered to the floor
The rest she washed off in the shower
He stayed though
No amount of effort could dispel him
His smile danced in her mind
The image of him
Hailing a cab
Alongside a pretty blonde girl
A pretty blonde girl that wasn't her.

Terror

Hurry, children, hurry
I told you we should've left earlier
Hurry, children
Excuse me sir, but you've been selected for a random search
As has your daughter
But sir, we'll miss our flight
I'm sorry, protocol.

They're searching Daddy
His arms out like Jesus on a crucifix
Silence from the wand
Someone is rifling through my bag
Pushing aside crayons and coloring books
Telling me with steel grey eyes that I could put it all back in
Excusing us an hour later to our long missed flight.

I learned fear that day
I learned that I looked Middle Eastern
I learned that even a child is suspect
I learned that random searches, aren't
I learned the meaning of "bullshit" that day.

Wallflower Syndrome

It was the perfect opportunity to be someone else for the night. No one had any expectations of me. I could have been that wild girl that everyone wants to know. But I froze, paralyzed by self-doubt and the little voices that said, “You don't do that. Who are you kidding? You couldn't be that girl even if you tried.”

So, I sat on the lovely, cream-colored armchair and watched all the pretty people submerge into a world I couldn't get the courage to enter. Watching them, it all seemed so effortless, but I simply couldn't. I was cursed with wallflower syndrome and simply tapped my feet and stared longingly.

It was as if there was a strange invisible barrier that kept me from being anything but just there. Then came the wishing. The kind of lonely wishing that only made you sadder. The wish that someone would invite you. Someone who saw me sitting apart from everyone. They would come up to me grab my hand and say “let's go” and lead me into the throng of young people, moving with the music. Only then would I be able to dance. Because I was invited and that meant that someone wanted me there. I could be myself because that is what they expected and maybe even liked. But that someone never came.

So after a couple of hours of feeling alone in a crowded room, I left, feeling much worse than I did before I came in. I thought to myself, “Maybe next time. Maybe next time. Maybe next time you will be able to pull off the confidence and be that wild, self-assured girl. To be that someone who invites another lonely person to life.”

The Finisher

Two miles before reaching the finish line, I was running down a long, seemingly never-ending stretch of road where the heat rises off the asphalt in waves. People lined the street, holding neon signs that read, “You’re almost there.” If I could have lifted my legs higher than an inch off the ground, I would have kicked them in the face. “Almost there” and “there” are not the same, especially during a twenty-six mile event. I felt the stinging of chafed skin on my collarbone from where the hose of my camelbak had been rubbing for the last 16 miles. My torso was bent slightly forward from dehydration and exhaustion. I looked like a full-on running corpse. Every step felt as though I was walking on sharp knives.

Fuck this. My feet are so heavy. There’s no way I can finish, I told myself as my legs started slowing down.

The Well-Intentioned But Annoying Running Coach yelled to me, “You’re not quitting! Think of how far you’ve come, not just today but in the last five months.” She had met me at mile 21 and because she was obviously crazy, decided to run with me to the finish line.

She was right. I couldn’t quit now. Then I’d be just like *him*.

My All But Present Father was a talented runner. He broke distance records in his small Texas town and was given a full-ride to some of the top track schools in the country. He never went. Instead, My All But Present Father got my mother pregnant and knocked her around. After I was born, the only thing he seemed to chase was happiness at the bottom of the bottle.

He taught me how to run.

“Fuck, does this road ever end?” I asked the Well-Intentioned But Annoying Running Coach.

“Don’t focus on that. Just run to the next water station.”

As we neared the 25-mile mark, I couldn’t help but think about how close I was to finishing something I never thought I could start. Yes, my pace was fourteen minutes per mile. Yes, it felt more like a fast shuffle-walk, but I was moving forward. *The finish line is 1.2 miles away. Anyone can run 1.2 miles.*

My first time running a mile was six months before I had decided to run the marathon. I had been invited to get together with a local running team in Modesto. I went because I am nice and secretly worry what people think when I say no, but I didn’t want to be there. I had made up my mind on the drive over that people who decided to put their bodies through the stress of running are not sane. They sacrifice sleep, work, and from what I had read online, toenails.

Running was for motivated people. Running was not for me. I had never stuck with anything in my life up to that point besides my Master’s program. I acquired new hobbies every few months: yoga because I wanted a positive “everything in life is wonderful” attitude, crossfit because I wanted bragging rights, and knitting (until I realized how long it would take me to make a scarf), but I quit all of them after a few weeks.

Quitting was something I learned from My All But Present Father. He tried to be a father and husband for the first year of my life, and though he stayed for six years after that, his desire to drink and party eventually caused him to quit us, too.

I was seven when he finally left.

Over the years, he popped up like a circus in the night and attempted to be a present father, going to my junior high graduations and buying me Christmas presents, but he could never fully commit. Since I had no control in our relationship, I craved that control in every other part of my life. I remember going on my first snowboarding trip and thinking to myself, *I'm doing really well, but I'm going to fall any minute, I know it. It's going to hurt if I do.* So I made myself fall. And I never went snowboarding again.

I quit because I am afraid of failure. I quit because I don't believe I am a strong person. I quit because I want to have control.

As I trudged slowly along the straight path that warm, August day of my first mile ever, my mouth felt like a mixture of cotton and sand. I stopped every few feet to catch my breath; this physical movement was like a pillow pressed over my face, stifling my breaths. I felt everything: the swing of my arms as they pushed me forward, calves cramped with resentment, and side stitches that felt as though needles were threading my rib cage. But I didn't stop.

When my pace slowed and my lungs were no longer fighting for oxygen, I knew running was meant for me. Running that first mile was not about me trying to be perfect. It was not about analysis or deadlines or trying to juggle work, school, and my relationship. For the first time in my life, all I cared about was finishing something. In that moment, putting one foot in front of the other despite the pain was the only thought in my head.

The miles after my first were steps to prove that I was nothing like My All But Present Father. It took time for me to stop being shocked when, at the end of each week, I had run five, ten, twenty, forty miles. *Surely after my first two weeks of this, I'll be sitting on my couch alone, disappointed that I couldn't stick with it,* I'd tell myself. But I kept coming back each week for more.

When I hit mile 26, my legs suddenly felt like they'd been plugged into an outlet. *How do I have energy?* I saw my running team standing near the finish, cheering, "Go Alexia, you can do it." *I can do it. I am doing it.*

I told the Well-Intentioned But Annoying Running Coach, "You don't have to run the rest of the way with me. I've got this."

After five hours, I stumbled toward the finish line. I felt like Pinocchio, wooden and uncoordinated, as I proudly ran through the crowd.

"Finishing now is Alexia Brooks. Congratulations," the announcer said over the loud speaker.

My heart pounded in my head as I struggled to catch and even my breaths, the taste of salt from sweat and tears in my mouth. *I made it. I am here.*

If this were fiction, I would tell you that finishing the marathon taught me to stop worrying about all of the little insecurities I've carried with me from childhood. I would tell you that I no longer quit things. I would tell you that crossing the finish line made me want to call my dad and try to forgive him for giving up on me.

But this isn't fiction.

Crossing the finish line showed me that the difference between “almost there” and “there” is when you are “almost there” you can still quit. I could have stopped at mile 24 when I ran out of water and my body forgot how to stand upright, but I didn’t. I finished.

My Autobiography

Written by: Everyone Else

I am...

“Too loud.” – a first grade teacher.

“Gifted.” – a high school teacher.

“Too confident.” – a college professor.

“Smart.” - a friend who studied.

“Too quiet.” – a friend who never listened.

“Funny.” – a friend who laughed.

“Too innocent.” – a boy who wanted more.

“Cute.” – a boy who borrowed.

“Too slutty.” – a boy who never knew.

I am...

Millennials

We're not lazy,
We're just depressed.
Because we can write a novel,
Or paint a masterpiece,
Or play at Carnegie Hall.
But until we end the killing
And stop the melting,
And make them money,
People will shake their heads,
And call us lazy.

Bakery



Coffee Talk

A catacomb's depth within a palm's breadth.

Resilient as a hero near the end;
bitter like a marriage on the mend.

(You might be bitter too, if people constantly spoke over you.)

I bore into your idle face to find an answer,
only to be met with an echo.

I don't yet have the grace to see
that I'm looking to you in search of me.

Death is a Midnight Runner

We bled in darkness as we held hands.
Burning wood filled the air.
The rush down our veins
We're almost there.
The walls were starting to crack.
Opening my mouth for a breath,
I taste the sky.
Above were bright stars burning our eyes.
The cloth clenched in the palm of my hand was now drenched in crimson.
Our bodies cold to the touch.
You pressed me close to feel the warmth.
We knew we were falling.
You turned to me and said,
"Do you believe in me?"
as branches crackled beneath us,
we looked up to the sky,
unlike the stars, we wouldn't shine forever
The crisp page slowly sets fire;
illuminating the soul, as it turned to black.

Cosmic Keys

Today I play God.
Today I define the limits.
life and death, free will and fate,
the edge between what is now
and what will never be.

Today you slip into legend.

Today I order up the death cocktail,
weary of your weariness,
your cancerous bowels
and unsteady bladder.

Today I end all that and ship
you into oblivion.

They say we do it out of love,
this murder, for that is what it is,
make no mistake.
Today I play God—
a man unable to balance his checkbook,
a fool who often says the wrong thing,
a dreamer who feigns reality
with stories.
Today I'm given the cosmic keys.

Will you dream, canine friend, of fields
and ten thousand tennis balls, of darting deer
and rivers unpawed?
Will you plow peace and serenity
and laughing children?
Will you remember us, your executioners,
and forgive us our arrogance and our love?

Today I play God with your life.

Bottomless Pit

There I was,
Leering down at the pit beneath me,
Wondering whether it
Was bottomless or not.
And I asked myself,
When I dive into this silky abyss
Which would I prefer?
Bottomless?
Or not?
If bottomless, I would flail forever
And have a feeling of uneasiness;
The likes of a person on a train
That never comes to a complete halt.
Yet if I knew there was a bottom—
An ending, a climax—
I could spread my arms outward,
Close my eyes,
Clench my teeth,
And brace for the impact.
After a bit of arduous thought,

Volleying back and forth
Between bottomless
Or not,
I decided to walk away,
Letting the question rest
Until the next time
I felt the strong urge
To discover the answer.

Contradictions

The coffee is rich,
but the drinker is poor.
Contradictions dominate
like never before.
The looks on faces
are not simple to see
when the roughest around
can act so gently.
Warm places in the world
are not as cold as they seem
when nightmarish thoughts
are considered a dream.
The story is over,
but there is no end.
The climax is coming,
but no one knows when.
And if the sourest taste
comes from sugar cane,
Contradictions dominate
us again and again.

How to Spend a Trust Fund in Three Years

First semester of college (out-of-state tuition), Dolce & Gabbana handbags, Fendi handbags, Fendi sunglasses, at least 36 pairs of athletic shoes because you work part time at Lady Foot Locker and you just can't help yourself, first generation Dell laptop, first generation Wi-Fi card for that new laptop, expensive Christmas and birthday gifts for your whole family (at least \$100 on each person, no less) every year, buying your friends meals all of the time (breakfast, lunch and dinner), Prada shoes, Express dresses, Express pants, Express lacy tops with frills on the edges, extravagant prom dresses, CD's, concerts, hotels near those concert venues because you're a bit of a groupie, manicures, pedicures, acrylics, facials, massages, manicures when you decide you just can't stand the acrylics anymore for the millionth time, trips to NYC, trips to Boston, trips to Hawaii, trips to anywhere but here, gallons and gallons and gallons of gas driving everywhere in California, a red Mustang, a million repairs to that red Mustang after you irresponsibly crash it more than a couple of times, second generation Dell laptop, rounds at the bar for everyone, loaning your "friends" money, court proceedings to get that money back, a brand new Mazda 3 after you've wrecked your Mustang for the last time, repairs to the Mazda 3 after you rear-ended someone, bailing your boyfriend out of sketchy-drug-induced situations, paying off your drug-addict-boyfriend's debts, therapy because you're falling deeper into a depression because you've pretty much spent all the money, but it was just a guilt trip anyway; your mom didn't die at the hands of the hospital so you could live extravagantly.

Coin Slot



Grace

Serenity is not your calling.
You rush ahead,
never looking back.
Bestowing blessings,
bringing smiles.
Manifestations of your name
are unseen but to the wise.
Old soul, new body,
You honor all with your presence.

Mywitness News at Seven

Today I was not raped in India, stoned in Pakistan,
beheaded in Syria, blown-up in Iraq, or kidnapped in Mexico.

I did not appear on TV and tell the nation we need to end the war
in Afghanistan or do a rebuttal of that position.

I was not accused of insider trading on Wall Street or
robbing the Chemical Bank branch on 63rd Road in Queens.

I did not pitch in this afternoon's Mets game when the
New York Metropolitanans lost to Cincinnati 20-1.

I was not involved in the cold front that came in from
the east this morning or the warm front directly behind it.

I was not invited to tonight's
Academy Award Ceremonies.

I did not have the winning ticket
in Wednesday's Ten Million Dollar Lotto Drawing.

That's it for now, see you again tomorrow,
same time, same station.

My Portrait at Sixty-Two

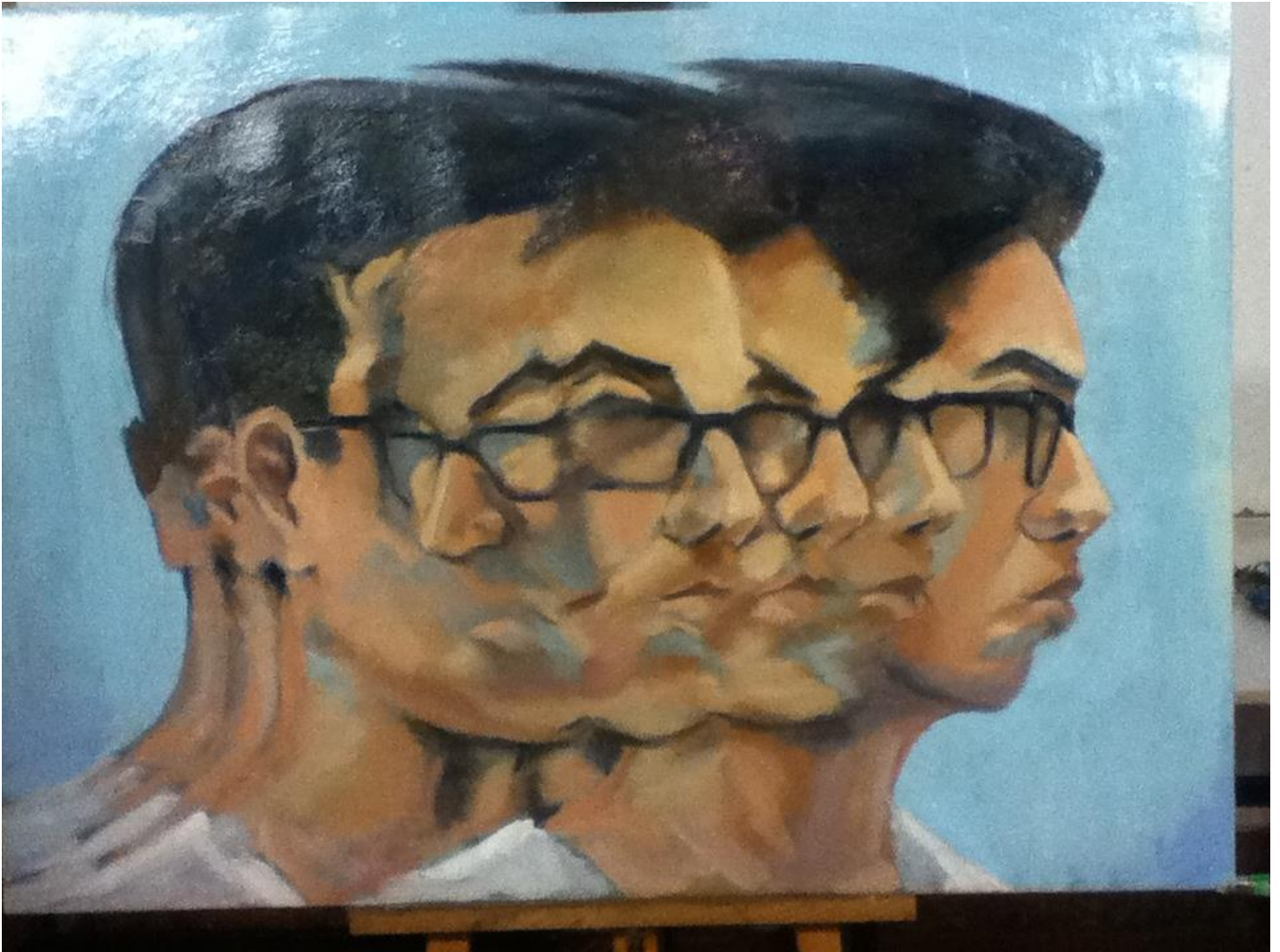
As you get older, the layers chip away.
The surface that once defined everything
has flown off, now gone, unable to stay.
What isn't secure can no longer grasp or cling:
this is the evolution of the knowable human thing.

The eyes no longer stare ahead but stare *at*.
Lips tighten, having savored all in half a smile.
Muscles relax, losing interest in any combat,
hoping there's a chance to linger and stay awhile.
Stillness prevails, traveling the latest mile.

Anticipation doesn't exist in the look
consciousness has long ago decided to forget:
tragedy, loss, memory and even love's hook;
elements of satisfaction, conviction, actions undertook.
It's the *last* sentence that sums up a book.

A comfortable confidence defines the frame,
light matters only because it's always there;
the constant in this world without blame.
The man in the photo wonders if you are there
to give reason to his relentless, hopeful stare.

Overgrown



It Was Late and We Stopped Talking, But We Didn't Hang Up

I thought of
telephone poles
strung along
the ditches—
some tilted
as if drunk
or merely weary of
all these words;
leaning,
picking up
a distant
signal from a time
when they rustled,
trees.

The Communard's Prayer

"Do not allow yourselves to be deluded by the abstract word freedom. Whose freedom?"
— Karl Marx.

Incentives are bourgeois,
ambition is corrupt;
Commies want to make life *blah*
so, sybarites, the jig is up.

Poverty's a pissing match
for martyrs who can live on weeds;
Here's equality, with just one catch —
your comrades will define your needs.

There's no account for spending cash,
commodities are decadent;
With so much good food in the trash
our work ethic's itinerant.

Acquisitions are selfish,
the common weal is paramount;
Possessions are, forsooth, hellish —
ergo, privation's bon vivant.

With scant supplies, it's one for all,
and all for those who wangle best;
There's no committee that's too small
to find some recompense to wrest.

Competition is viewed askance,
so just deny that it exists;
We're all happy as worker ants —
at least the duped initiates.

You'll be accepted and commended
if you take on our grunt jobs;
Disbelief must be suspended
slaving for us lazy slobs.

We're not 'leaders' nor 'commissars,'
we're democratic communards;
We're all equal, we're all neighbors —
but the house holds all the cards.

Incentives are rightly gainsaid
by those who have some up their sleeve;
Movements like these are always led
by goldbrick tricksters trained to thieve.

Join the revolution, my friend
but don't expect it to join you;
Yet, there never is an end
in faith that fairy tales come true.

Characters

Every day I take the stage,
performing sundry characters
to harmonize with friends
and make peace with motley strangers.

I wake up without makeup,
the script is virgin paper;
my closet's full of costumes
and the world is in rehearsal.
I'm a youngster to my father
and a sage around my daughter;
I'm a farceur with my brother
and the lover of my wife.
I'm a bon vivant at dinner
and a clergyman at lunch;
I'm a crosspatch over breakfast
and a rascal after midnight.
I'm a subject to the King
and a sovereign to my servants;
I'm a fool to common wights
and a peer to rival wits.
I'm a rogue around the pious
and a saint to criminals;
I'm a scamp next to the pompous

and a coxcomb to the dull.
I'm a jester for the churl
and a misanthrope to fops;
I'm a libertine compared to bores
and a pedant to the Cyprian.
I play the scholar in the village
and a rustic when at court;
I'm just a number on a payroll
then a cynosure at home.
I'm a villain to the evil
and a hero to the just;
I'm the opposite of sensible
when the dialogue goes bust.
To many, I'm a silhouette,
mere fantoccini at stage rear,
and yet at times I thrust the plot
when fate invents, extempore.

Every day I take the stage, performing
impromptu;
whether tragic roles or the burlesque,
the spectator, not the actor,
there anent may choose.

A Letter to the Gravity I've Gained

I hold you in my hands,
45 extra pounds,
Jelly rolls peeking out between my fingers.
My bloated belly,
Round as soup bowls;
Burrito powerhouse.
My love handles whisper
From beneath my Spanx:
“You can’t hide me forever.”

I used to be so thin. Or,
I’d wear oversized sweaters
To create the illusion
That my body had any gravity.

But you’ve gained on me
Like a cracker fills
With cheese
During tedious conversations
At parties.

The gravity I craved so much
Is too heavy
For my frame.

They call it “Pre-diabetic.”

I turn to the side,
In front of the mirror,
Observing how you’ve shaped my body:
Overbearing hips.
Sandbag breasts,
Sitting like deadweight on my chest.
Plump fingers.
Thighs like tree trunks.

This body was once a lithe vehicle.
Now it’s a lurching jalopy.
A steamroll
From one meal
To the next.

It started with a medication
That increased my appetite,
But soon it grew into an obsession
To never feel empty.
That gravity I wanted so badly,
Was now lead in my stomach.

I think about
When you were an illusion
I tried to create,
And I wonder why I ever wanted
Half of you
When I was half of me.

I Will Endure

I know my path has come to be
Far beyond those that linger on
For fortune to rest somewhere
From an age once come and gone.
The great darkness of nightfall
Is imminent as the approaching dawn,
Though distant from an intimate sight
For the ground I am left to tread upon.

Surely worlds that wait to be born
Bear these burdens of grandeur
As much as the echoes wrought
Make the resonance more obscure:
The remains for what will prevail
Amidst creatures, vicious and pure,
For a venture into the gathering;
The difference that I will endure.

Mind the Gaps



To the Friend Who Asked if I'm Still Going to Their House

Listen, I know we made plans
But I've already taken off my bra
And I've put on my sweats
And I'm pretty caught up
Downloading this illegal copy
Of The Sims 4.
So, if it's alright
I think I'll stay home,
Just like all the other times
We've made plans.

I'm sorry I always end up
Comfortably settled in.
Or maybe I just hate
The ambiguity
Of what you'll think of me.
I hate interaction the way
A bird of prey hates cages.
I hate the nerve-racking
Experience every time I fail
To find my voice
And make conversation.

Every word that spills
From my mouth
Is a fountain of hate
Because I hate
Every word that spills
From my mouth.
Because I can't handle
The curves of my misdirection.
The pounding of questions
In my head,
Battalions of worries like:
"Did she not hear me?"
Or
"Did I say something wrong?"

Inside, I crumble
Like towers
Without foundation.

Public Display of Erection

The first time I made out with a girl, we had been dating for two months. We were both fifteen years old, sitting in the back booth at the dimly lit Burger King. I didn't know what was more romantic: the dead flies in the overgrown spider web in the corner of our window or the bearded man child in red plaid, staring at us from across the five star restaurant. Whatever it was, love was in the air, along with the smell of burnt French fries. I was an acne-faced, blonde-haired pothead. My First Kiss was a chubby white girl with hair as blonde as American cheese, lips as red as a raw tomato, and eyes so green they were almost romaine. Her orange soda stained teeth matched exquisitely with the Cheeto dusted cold sore on her bottom lip. The bright sky outside had fainted shortly before she made her move.

She whispered, "Can I finally get what I want?" Before I had a chance to respond with anything more articulate than "huh?" She wrapped her arms around my neck like a Boa constrictor and pulled me in for the venomous kiss. The kiss was like eating a Triple Whopper with no hands: sloppy. It's like our tongues were fighting for sole possession of one mouth, and she was winning. I didn't know what to do. I made the next move and grabbed her left boob. Thank God she had my tongue because I didn't know what the fuck to say. Maybe something along the lines of "hey, were you chewing gum because I think I swallowed it." Suddenly, we realized where we were. We both stopped kissing and put our sweaty hands back onto the sticky table. We saw six or seven faces, that's twelve to fourteen eyes, dart at us like we were the bullseye. Just then, her phone vibrated; her mom was outside. I hugged her goodbye and gave her a kiss to go. After she left, I stood up sluggishly and walked to the front of the line with a wad of dainty dollars in my hand. I felt my throbbing dick rubbing against my zipper with each step. I bought a Whopper Jr. to devour on my walk home. I saw an older greasy man staring at me as I walked out the old door. *What do you want?* I looked down —my boner was on full display like My First Kiss' cold sore.

Just two months before this romantic display of affection, I was smoking weed like I normally would do on a Tuesday night and lying about it through text to my girlfriend Too Christian to Kiss Me. See, when we first started dating and she found out I smoked, she said she couldn't be with me if I continued. So I did the only logical thing a fifteen year old boy could do: lie to her and keep smoking ganja. I mean, it helped to deal with her incessant attempt to convert me to Christianity.

It's true, some great things can come from organized religion and reading religious texts, but what teenage boys really want isn't Jesus, Muhammad, or Buddha— unless that's slang for weed. What we really want is sex, sex, and let me ponder the third option— sex! Now, around this time I had begun talking to My First Kiss, and even though she wasn't necessarily the hottest flame on the sun, she still made my blood boil over with lust. Lust for a chance to be myself with a girl. Lust for a chance to actually kiss my girlfriend. Lust for having thoughtless sex that'd make me a god amongst my friends.

Three months after I had broken up with Too Christian to Kiss Me and started dating My First Kiss, I was at the nearby Target with my best friend Jordan, a five foot tall, spikey haired Caucasian, deciding which condoms to buy.

“How many do you think you’ll need? The eight pack or the twenty-eight pack?”

“Um, I think I better get the twenty-eight pack because I think I’m going to be having a lot of sex from now on.”

We grabbed the yellow box of variety pack Trojans off the shelf. I didn’t know the difference between the ribbed condoms, the thin condoms, or the extra lubed condoms at the time, but a few years later I found out that they’re all just awful. It feels like you’re humping the inside of a deflated balloon after having your penis accidentally numbed by a blind dentist. The wrinkled faced, blonde haired cashier stared at Jordan and me like we had something in our teeth. She didn’t say anything at first; she smiled occasionally, put the condoms in the bag, asked for way too much money and handed us the bag. As we started to walk away she stopped us in our tracks like we were trains running out of gas:

“You boys be safe now,” she shrieked from halfway across the store. We didn’t know what to say so we instinctively said, “Thank you?”

A week after buying the condoms, My First Kiss and I were making out on my mattress on the ground when she suddenly stopped.

“Take off your clothes.”

It was like she had a gun pointed at my head because I did exactly as she said. I started with my shirt and after my skinny exterior was exposed, I kicked off my shoes and socks, and before I knew it I was standing there completely exposed.

“Okay, now your turn.” *Ohmygawd I can’t believe this is happening.*

“I’ll just take off my pants and undies I guess.” *Take your time.* Two virgins inching near adulthood.

She didn’t say anything at the time, but I guess she felt like she was too chubby to be naked in front of another human, like she didn’t want to gross me out or something. To be honest, she wasn’t even fat, just a little less skinny than society permits. When you look at a magazine, it’s never a stretchmarked stomach on the cover, it’s more like a photo shopped picture of a model who doesn’t even look that good in real life.

We started kissing, trading saliva in tongue tying transitions. *Why am I not getting a boner?* I ran my fingers through her hair. We laid down on my spring-less mattress. My hands were shaking. My mouth was as dry as Death Valley.

“Steven, it’s okay. I love you” *I think I love you too.* “Am I doing something wrong?”

“No, I just can’t relax. I think I need some tea.” We strolled out of my room into the dimly lit kitchen with my bones, dick, and crescendo heart beating. My shaking hands grabbed the Brita filtered container of water. I spilt more water on the granite countertop than in my cup. *Fuck.*

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay” *FUCK NO, I’m not ready for sex.* After wiping the counter down with a paper towel, I finally got my water into the microwave and set the timer for two minutes.

Two minutes of waiting naked with my flaccid penis mocking her drenched pussy.

My eyes were tantalized by this naked girl standing in front of me in my kitchen. I itched my hands as I pictured them running against her prickly, nearly-shaven legs. 1:30 seconds left. *Fuck, say something.*

“So, how often do you shave your legs?” *Why the fuck would you say that?*

She smiled. *Okay it wasn't that weird then.* “Like once a week, usually on Sunday morning.”

“I see, I'd rather shave my legs than go to church anyways.”

“Well, you could shave my legs, maybe other things too.”

“Like, your arms?” *HER PUSSY YOU IDIOT, SHE MEANS HER PUSSY.*

“No, like my vagina. Then you could fuck me in the tub.” *In the tub? I can't even fuck you in my bed.* My eyes dart over to the microwave. *45 seconds left.*

“Oh, well I'm sure that could be arranged.”

“You should just fuck me now.” *My tea though.*

“My tea though.”

“Fuck the tea.”

“Well that'd be uncomfortably hot.” BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP. “Tea's ready.”

“I'll be in the bedroom; come get me when you're ready.” I took a burst of mental pictures as her ass strutted away, jiggling like a jammed doorknob. *She's great.* I dipped a black tea bag into the steaming cup of water. I bowed my head down to the cup and inhaled. The steam slapped my nose. *Mmmm.* As I exhaled my dick twitched and grew like a sapling soaked in steroids. *Fuck the tea, I'm ready.*

I ran towards my room, slowing down right before I came into the doorway. I strutted into my sex chamber, cool as a polar bear's icicle with my boner on full display.

“Hey, welcome back, sexy.” She was sprawled on my mattress like she was in the middle of making snow angels. I sat down, kissed her like she kissed me my first time. *The condom.* I reached for my condom on the nightstand; she grabbed my hands in midflight.

“Allow me.” *Fine by me.* “I've never done it before so this should be interesting.” The first one broke, second one busted, third one was just perfect.

She finally slid on a condom and laid back to let me enter manhood. *Holy Fuck this is really happening.* Of course, it would have been nice to know how to have sex. Sex was like playing Clue without a clue. *Am I doing this right? I'll slide down, no up— fuck it I'll just do pushups.* She pulled me down from my exercising position, two sweaty bodies sliding into sensations. The smell of sex was like a fish market mixed with a male locker room. Twenty minutes later of no cumming led to us waving the white flag. I looked at her, she was panting, drenched with sweat. She looked like she had been riding the dick of death. *I'm not that good, she's just out of shape.* I was embarrassed for not cumming like I thought I would. I didn't even think about making her cum though.

After sex there was just silence, silence, silence followed by “I love you” from both of us. We looked at the closet, clock, faded brown fence out the window, but not at each other. I threw on my clothes, she slipped on hers. She looked up at me after putting on her last boot.

“I can't wait 'till next time”

“Me neither, maybe it'll be in the tub.” That'd be the last day we'd ever have sex.

S.Z. Leaves for Vietnam (1964)

Men from other wars drive him to the station.

He wonders which one will visit his father
and bring him groceries and L&Ms and vodka,
which one will keep an eye on his brother,
which one will bring the trash bags to the dump
and get the deposit on the quarter keg,
still spitting out foam and final gasps.
As a boy he liked walking the tracks so he knows
what he'll see looking out the train window:
the rug outlet store, the abandoned lamp factory,
the blockhouse from the old packing plant.
He'll see sumacs with their bright red berries,
mushrooms shaped like toilet seats, then sunchokes,
guileful yellow faces among the fallen trees.
Then he won't recognize anything at all.

He waves, the train pulls away. He finds a seat.

Please Excuse This Sex Poem

The chrome shower head gleams in the school-colors, tiled stall in goddamn Ohio. The top spurting water toward the light like pampas grass, the stream pouring down intermittently in silver-grey, past crumbling and once white grout lines: little flash floods of treated water, rivering over shoulder blades soft pressed against the firm ceramic wall, hard arced toward the water, over eyelids and wet lashes, from the tip of the skin covered cartilage of my nose down the (groove just under the nose), a cough from the neighboring stall reminds me of my duty. Beginning with the solar plexus, the throne of the sun of my heart and circle outward over my pecs and up and down my lats, down my stomach and the knotty pines of my back, across the stone bridge of my shoulders and arms, wrists and hands and fingers, my neck and the cliff of my chin, my face, and the sky of my head where it feels like the storm cloud of my mind rolls on. Ducking under the waterfall, the soapy water floods down my back past dimple caves that are found just below my meridian and above the mounds of my ass cheeks and over my loins. I wash here carefully, down the crevice of my butt, perineum and the back of my ball sack to the front of where perhaps my spirit dwells, base and shaft and head, I cup my balls to wash between my thighs, down their trunks to knee and back of knee, down skinny calves, ankles and feet and then it's when I wash between my toes that my neat body becomes disorganized again when I remember our toes grazing. Even here you unsort me. Your parts and my parts so mixed up, your chin on my lats, my thigh around your waist, the unseen parts of me inside the unseen parts of you. I'm supposed to be showering but instead I'm doing equations again, solving for y; there are so many ways we fit together.

My Shadow

My shadow and I are not on speaking terms.
He smells bad. Older than I, his grooming
is substandard – all wild eyebrow
hairs and uncombed ears.

He is a disgrace: wears the same worn
jeans, unwashed, and a T-shirt for days
on end. He mopes and won't leave
the house. He's a bag of sighs and slight moans.

I don't know how he got this way. We used
to be pals, confidantes, I trusted him
with my thoughts, my friends,
my best cashmere sweater. Now, he

can't eat without spilling food down
the front of him. He scratches himself
whenever he likes. He has a vile mouth,
even with women and small children.
I can't take him anywhere.

Local News

It's a steady diet of car accidents,
robberies, folks missing, folks
arrested, meth labs, marijuana
growing, and weather.

We listen for the names.

We might know some of the unfortunates.

Whenever the suspect is an older, white
male, 5' 10", 180 pounds, my wife
looks across the living room at me
with a look that plumbs my capacity,
that measures my quiet desperation,
that gauges hunger, that calibrates
the intensity of my watching.

She looks away before I can say
it wasn't me.

Come to Play

Come out beastie,
Come out and play.
Take me by the hand,
Show me your way.

Tempt me, taunt me,
Swallow me whole.
Yours I am to take,
For that is my goal.

Take me higher, faster,
Farther than I've been.
Away is what I seek,
And you are to be my sin.

Obliterate, eradicate,
Vacuum out me.
Void the past tense,
Proselytized I will be free.

Using you, as you use me,
Consuming together to get what we need.
Leave me vacant but leave me whole,
I still have to deal with the burden in my soul.

Door



Loose

I am loose. My friends all laugh when I state this about my being. Is it wrong to be loose? I am proud of it. I don't have to hold on to my pains or insecurities. I do not hide from my problems or my fears. I let it all fly like an amber in the wind.

Being loose means not being afraid. I have morals and I'm not afraid to own what I believe. I fight for what's right and I bleed to go green. So what if I'm an open book and let myself go a bit. Sometimes the best things in life are loose. Shoes that are too tight don't get bought but ones more loosened are desired. A branch stuck to a tree makes bad firewood, but ones that were loose enough to fall to the ground are preferred. Being loose can be good. So don't judge a loose friend. Maybe they have something you left loose.

Misleading Poem

*for Rich Trama
and you,
as it were*

Listen: before the tornado
touched down, a mother and son
stumbled through a gas station,
followed by the Arkansas Marauder,
who blew bits of their skulls
over the dairy aisle like silos
shredded in the wind. See?
You already missed the point.

However.

This is the way my roommate
ends a conversation
wherein he's unpacked his soul.
I'm beginning to think
what follows the transition
is similar to the scene
after the scene
where Jessica Alba fucks
the protagonist: he, in the bathroom,
reeking of latex, pissing sideways;
she, finishing the job in quiet
panic. Then, the clouds. Then,
what feels like rain.

Why the distance between us?
That's a terrible joke. As a matter of fact,
here – take this as consolation:

when faced with nighttime traffic,
a deer dives off the Route 78
connector bridge, unaware

the darkness conceals hundreds
upon millions of misfortunes.
I think of my father. And,
as a matter of fact,
let's not go there.
How mournful the unravel
as I slowly peel
space from your body
'till nothing left is sacred.
Can you feel the wind? Listen:
Between you and me,
I asked too much.

In an Elevator on Wall Street

Bayard Rustin was standing
in an elevator on Wall Street
before the 1964 March on Washington,
going to the office of an executive
liberal enough to give money.

A wealthy stranger
held out to Rustin 50¢.

"Boy, please shine my shoes."

Rustin — dignified, tall,
beautiful, black, gay —
reached into his own pocket,
took out a white handkerchief,
knelt on the floor and polished
the man's shoes.

The man still held out the 50¢.
"Boy, you forgot your half dollar."

That was a lot of money.
In those days a shine
usually cost only 15¢.

Rustin said, "Thanks,
but I do it only for love,
not for money."

Communion of Suffering

The illuminated black keys of my keyboard
are chocolate covered mints to be peeled from
their metallic box and placed delicately

on the tongue like a wafer of the communion
of our bodies: unleavened bread we took from silver
plates in Chapel Hall, ice hanging from the roof.

When we took the cup, we drank so deeply
our heads tilted back enough to hit the metal strip
on the back of the hard, wooden benches.

My brothers were marked by this strip
on the back of their heads. Somewhere between
As oft and *amen*, my brothers and I clasped the tiny, plastic

cups between our palms and pushed our praying
hands together until the cup snapped
and the splinters pierce our hands. Amen.

This is what it feels like when
I am with you, brother. This is what it feels like
to write this without you here.

Christina's Break

At parent-teacher conferences her father
frowns, tells me Asian daughters get A's.
Teachers say she jumps the gun, doesn't check
her sums. Last week she stayed up late working
phones for "No on 8." Her t-shirt reads, "Rock
star in search of groupies." She's practicing
her break, that treacherous place where her voice
vaults the throat, blooms into a heady space.
She'd prefer to launch from the chest's strong board
each song like a grenade—a device named
after the pomegranate's seed-full shape.
Oh, she'll get the A's, cherry-blossom grades
that fade where they stick, nothing like these live
apple-bombs that land, burrow, germinate.

Steamed

I was only three when they started
calling me The Little Engine That Could,
a moniker that has dictated
every damn track I've taken since.

My siblings accuse me of stealing
the limelight. Can I help it if Little Bro
stuffs coal and implodes, Sis chronically derails,
or Dad rusts belly-up in the freight yard?

I was just doing my job,
the family achiever
bearing the brunt,
spurred on by Mom's steamed
and piercing whistle,
distracting us all
with my brilliant success.

Even now as I crest
each mountain higher than the last
I hear that whistle. I want to tell those
ambitious little readers, my adoring fans,

that there's nothing heroic
in my dogged chug, that this family role,
glamorous as it may seem,
isn't all choo-choo puffs and victories,

that sometimes when I hit the plains
I let my mind wander and dream
of laying my own tracks.

Human-beings' Prime Desires

Newborns gulp down breast milk and formula,
toddlers munch on bagel and cheese,
teenagers crave burgers and fries,
young adults drink beer and whiskey,
senior citizens suck chicken soup,
and a nurse gives you a spoon of milk
to spit in your husband's face
when you grasp for your last breath.

Food is your first and your last desire.
Love is just a side dish.

Penance

The night continues
wary, wanting, alone
seduced by spells
above the sky.

the unsettled twilight
and you converse
to barren sounds
beneath the stars.

The world changed—
swallow your fears.
Rabid visions await,
wavering in silence.

Unlearn your past.
Create black shadows
with shaking hands
at the crossroads.

Creatures

We are strange creatures—
Young enough to call ourselves adults
And old enough that others will
But old enough too to know
That we're only *faking* it –
And young enough too to know
Only that it terrifies us
Without yet knowing why

We are strange creatures—
Devoting our hours to dreams
And sometimes only desires
That sometimes we already know
Will take us places we *don't* –
And wasting our hours on nothing
Infinite some things we know
Too late are meaningless

We are strange creatures—
For some of us to pursue passion
And others to chase success
Or to amble in apathy
Only to find passion hoards *pennies*
Success entombs a thirsty soul
And apathy runs us into the ground
Before we begin anything at all

Untitled



The Battle for 5am

The rooster boasts constantly
while petite birds sing to match the phoenix's thunderous voice
that wakes defenseless sleepers.

Miles away, I challenge the crow
sitting Indian style, open window, wide awake
squinting, ready to battle this beast for 5 a.m.

As the rising sun creates a wave of light that traces the town,
I unharness my slingshot of memories,
and launch stories that begin:

I've won and shared 5 a.m. with past lovers, cuddled together, longing for perfection in sunrise.
I've driven 5 a.m. to far off destinations, watching the sun push over mountains to guide me.
I've drank 5 a.m. brewed in sweet tea drenched in morning dew.
I've slept and ignored 5 a.m. while it covered me with its cool, breezy hands, wanting nothing in return.
And I've loved 5 a.m. like a faded photograph that brings tranquility.

Out of ammo.

Obviously your relationship is stronger
statue-like on your wooden post,
protecting a golden field of fallen weapons
ridiculing victims that have tried to best you.

So rooster, collect one more
and add my name to your roster!

Today you roar victory.

This and of That

The holder of hearts or the destroyer of dreams
are reflected in the tarot's eyes.

Not "when's" and "how's"
but "ifs" and uncertainty.

Fitting perfectly in the palm of a malformed hand
sits a cracked porcelain statue
that is treasured
or crushed into dust.

Unbeknownst of fate,
I pull another arrow from my quiver
and aim for cloud 9
letting go
knowing that tricksters and jesters
will reveal my hand.

How to be Perfect

I want to be vulnerable so I can get hurt,
approaching the most mesmeric model,
barring a grocery list of qualities
meant for a modern Olympian God with
a slice of reality that chokes pragmatist.

Scrolling through tarnished, superficial statements
from a mental subscription on how to be perfect that include
dressing in clothes from designers whose names I can't pronounce,
working out to prepare for a fight that I will never get into, and
tanning to capture that impeccable shade of gold.

Instead of swirling in a grotesque picture book, longing for resolution,
I present a nonfiction alternative,
trading it like a vintage baseball card.
It includes a centerpiece of adjustment,
A first step on the yellow brick road,
realizing the world isn't painted in tinsel town.

The leading line mentions that
I want you to be vulnerable,
so you can approach your thoughts
and perfect them.

Hospital Visit

The hollow feeling
suffocates the senses,
paralyzes the dreams
when death clenches
poisoning thoughts
of forgotten tomorrows.

Feelings drain out
like the color of the pale walls or
these inanimate eyes,
staring intensely at nothing,
equivalent to the Halloween Jack-o'-lantern
wishing for mortality in November.

The frosted hand prints on the window
covered in Christmas lights
brings childhood joy to the world.
Yet, joy has forgotten this mausoleum,
glancing, disregarding the mumbles.

Listening.
Reawakened.
Like.
Ouroboros.

Seeping out of
familiar patterns,
I unsteadily
Stumble,
pick up
fragmented hope
and focus on
your revival.

Waking Up

It has been nearly three weeks since my brother went back home to his family after the estate sale, and I have not touched a thing. Part of me still grieving, part too busy, and part perturbed that I have to handle this all on my own. I've put off the inevitable of sorting through what appears to be mostly junk strewn over the property.

Early summer – the calendulas are in full bloom near the parlor chimney. The brown remains of iris bulb plantings line both sides of the walkway up to the sunken porch. And two honeysuckle vines twined around the t-posts of the old clothesline next to the house have met in the center, forming a comfy-looking, green and orange sling.

After 6:00 PM and still a hot and humid ninety degrees, I scan the front yard, assessing what I can accomplish in the couple hours of daylight left. I'm drawn to the biggest heap first. I stoop down and reach for a rusty wheel that looks like it could be a part to an old plow, but it is half under some termite-ridden clapboards too heavy for me to lift. I let out a robust grunt while trying to loosen the boards to no avail. A horned lizard I have disturbed scurries past me. "Eeooww!" I shriek – not because I am afraid of the lizard, but because I feel a piercing sting on my right lower leg. I have stepped onto a nest of biting harvester ants. I jump up and run away like a mad woman, frantically shaking out of my clothes and nearly stripping them off in the process.

Once safely away from the nest I calm myself, slip my clothes back into place, then head around back toward the barn past the clearing where the pigsty used to be. I start sifting through a lesser, more manageable heap, and am making surprising progress until I come across something curious. After intense scrutiny, I determine it's a mangled quirt – that thing-a-ma-jig for tapping horses on the butt. My mind races back in time, and I visualize me as a pint-sized kid on the corral fence, watching Grandpa ride stately upon his horse, rounding up the cows. I dreamed of being a lady wrangler in rodeo shows when I grew up, but that all changed by the time I hit puberty.

The sun now setting quickly, I return my attention to the heap. I kick my sifting into overdrive and am almost at the heap's bottom when I spot Grandma's supper call triangle. She loved clanging that thing, and oh, how she could clang it. Had her own special rhythm. We loved hearing it too, just as much as we loved filling our tummies with the home-cooked meals that routinely followed.

I stand up and gaze out into the distance toward the dilapidated train trestle just beyond the marsh where we kids used to catch crawdads. I linger in the moment. Tears well up in my eyes as I am reminded of more heartwarming family memories. I ponder the importance of stories. I ruminate on perspective. Dusk falls, the full moon shows faintly through the cumulus clouds, the crickets let their presence be known, and I'm happy to be here.

July

Sousaphone bells, brass blossoms in the shade
Of tall cottonwoods in Williston, North
Dakota. The High School Band marched and played
"The Thunderer" the week before the Fourth.
Then morning staggered into mid-day heat
And solstice sun set the leaves aquiver.
I pushed a backward mower down the street,
Mowed and raked for cash. The shiny shiver
Of my sweat would change to things to eat:
Payday, Nesbitt's orange pop, Almond Joy;
Relief from tunafish and cream of wheat.
The war was won and a 9-year-old boy
Helped end the wartime sugar rationing.
And as the reel spun in the growing green,
Blade to blade, it spewed quarters fashioning
Enchanted hours before the silver screen.
Horse operas, Frankenstein and mysteries,
Abbot and Costello, Time Marches On,
Fantasy matinees, faux histories,
Reel to reel over an endless lawn.
A green eternity in simpler times,
Films with happy endings, poems with rhymes.

The Letter

I don't know how many times I've reread that letter. Soon, I'm sure, the ink will begin fading and the paper will fall to pieces in my hand. But that hasn't happened quite yet and I continue to read it still. When the time comes that I can no longer identify where the words have been, I should have committed it to memory. Maybe I could rewrite it on something else, but until then it is carved in stone in the back of my mind, waiting to be called forth to remembrance.

There is something amazing about this simple letter, something so genuine. The mere act of saying what is in the heart makes it unique and I wonder every time I engulf myself in it how much time you spent with each pen stroke. I question how many times your fingers had touched the same spot. I speculate if the significance shifted as you have crossed over this tree, this definition of organic matter that sacrificed itself so that you can remind me that I am not forgotten. So that you can tell me that you are still alive in this world and have not given me up to sheer memory.

Perhaps after I have read your words over continuously and I begin to envision the placement of your hand on the paper and the way you must have looked, immersing yourself in your thoughts that you were trying to transcribe onto paper, then maybe my imagination will recreate you. That as I visualize your fingers into the palm of your hands, to your wrists that trail up to your arm, perhaps with time I can draw the image of you in my mind into a life-size drawing of your entire body; a body I haven't seen for years. And maybe after you have been drafted I can fill in the details with each letter I receive hereafter. Later, with time, I will be able to have every detail in line, down to the way you wrinkle your nose when you smile, to every spec of color in your eyes; eyes that had to reread your own letter, proofing it, filling it with remnants of yourself so that with great hope, I can discover you, recreate you, years later, into my mind. Then eventually the details will come to me in my sleep and I can meet you there, we can dance and laugh. We will know each other better that way and can see how we compare to each other. Are your hands bigger than mine in reality or just in our dreams? Maybe I will see if my imagination wasn't lying to me and you really are who you drew yourself to be. I can wake up and know you. I will know everything about you. Afterwards, I will stand in a room with the memory of your letters in my hand and a vivid image of who you are now. I will imagine you into reality. Then you will be standing in front of me and all I have to do is just reach out and touch your face for myself. I won't have to pretend you are there but I will know that you are. And the details that were thought up would prove tangible; we could be happy. The words you revealed to me will become you, your hands a poem unraveling into a story; the story of the words that were carefully placed to redesign the curves of your body.

But until then, I'll just read your letters.

Remember

Think of me
When the day is done;
dream of me at night.
Remember the curves of my face
cast in the morning light.

Don't forget to forget
all my little flaws.
Don't take the memory with you
of all the done-me-wrongs
caused by all I chose to do.

Recall the good times
when I was at my best,
only follow my good steps,
abandon all the rest.

Tell stories of what I did,
let the heavy past stay past,
write my memory with colorful ink,
and only choose the best.
But don't sway them from what they think.

And don't forget to feel my love,
I'll be sending it every day.
I'll light your path in darkness
and help to show you the way.

The Homeless Are Not in My View

The wind off the river
Blows fine snow sideways
Like smoke through rocking trees,
And on branches dead leaves cling
Stubborn as the kids who
Toss a ball down below.

I can imagine Boreas, fat-cheeked,
Hovering over Long Island City
Exhaling with steady energy
The drama of storm
Against this dull December day.

But of course there's a window
Between me and all that.

Welfare



Artifacts



My best friend's son and I played a round of golf a few years back. It was the first time we had teed off since his father died. He inherited his father's clubs and golf bag. On the first tee, he unzipped one of the side pockets to put away his wallet. Inside was a water bottle and a half-full bag of sunflower seeds that hadn't been touched since the last time his father and I played.

When my mother-in-law died, we inherited a boom box her children had given her so she could listen to music without it becoming a bother. I put it on a shelf in the garage so I could play CDs and the Giants games while working in the yard. I decided to play some old Buffalo Springfield tunes. I opened the CD changer. It was filled with Christmas discs from the previous year. It was likely the last music she listened to.

That same Christmas, my wife and I had toured several homes as part of the "Holiday Open House" fund-raiser for Community Hospice. Each home offered refreshments. Some sold home-made gifts. Each house had its own unique collection of family memorabilia displayed on book shelves, mantles, window sills, pianos, and refrigerators. The refrigerators were especially interesting and revealing, with their collections of drawings, photos, report cards, coupons, lists, cartoons, reminders, and aspirations.

"Interesting, isn't it?" I said. "A room tells us so much about who we are."

"It is sweet," my wife added.

We moved past a dusty treadmill and I said, "We display things that are important to us to prove we're more or less okay. That we make sense. That we have value. That we've been here."

"It is sad," she replied.

The clutter, all the things that are worn out, the things we meant to do, all reveal this brokenness in our lives. Photos, a few trophies, artwork, some rare objects— show our pride, our few shining moments.

"It's a little selfish," I said. "We collect all these things, but we're only borrowing them for a while. When we're gone, they go live with somebody else."

"That's depressing."

"These rooms are future ruins."

She gave me that familiar look that said, "Lighten up."

As we exited through the living room, past the piano, a glass display case, and Christmas tree, I thought to myself: "What will people think when I'm gone and they sift through my ruins? I'm not sure I want to be defined by the artifacts I leave behind."

Intellectual Attraction

Write me a sonnet and you'll be the Romeo to my Juliet
All you need to do is impress me with your intellect
You don't need to scale the walls to make me your Mary Jane
You can be my Clark Kent and I'll be your Lois Lane
There's no need to fall prey to what society expects
Don't call me bae, shawty, or boo
You should just be you
Let's be nonchalant and just stay as we are
We don't need to live up to their expectations
We've gotten this far.

World Music

Periodically, critics declare a renaissance
in music played by one-armed rebels.
The reviews would go on forever,

if not for the confiscation of Chinese zithers
and the defenestration of Spanish guitars.
Pan pipes and djembe drums are poor

prophylactics against coups d'etat.
What a world is this where reggae stars
and blood-stained machetes coexist.

Keyboards

On this black box, where poetry prattled,
Levers and bars and buttons full of ought
And may, my fickle fingers rattled
Out ragged rhythms full of afterthought.
Words penned, pent in my notebook, would appear
Tattooed on this keyboard in staccato.
A regiment marching into the square,
Rhyme and its reason, meter and motto.

Now my memory is plugged into the wall.
Quiet keys save as what I think I write.
The printer sucks in paper, prints it all,
Spelling-corrected, spaced, stark black and white.
Everything's electric, even the mind,
Digital static.

Still my thumbs oppose,
Persist, insist on grasping what I find
Impossible to reproduce in prose.

Practice



To the Muse

I:

I have tasted the white petals within her mouth, for she rises to meet me during still, blank nights. Gossamer and lies; the muse of silk thread and silver-colored smiles blinds the view of that ceaselessly ticking clock that hangs from my brittle fingers and stalls the past - the past's sly prodding of the heart. And the heart's strings are not harp strings; the sound is hollow, dull, repeats, repeats and dies. The out loud golden laugh that follows the muse's smile is the only music able to prevail over the heart's tick-tock and the beating of the clock. Let's forget Time today that you are with me, my child, and make of this blank page a landscape embellished with the silver nudity of your arms. Let blinding smiles continue for ten more years hereafter. Let's make love once more, in this parody of rapture. Seize the page once more, my girl.

II:

My youth I spent away from you. You withered and I did, too. And Time built a mirror landscape where parts of you reflected off the eyes, the lips, the small frames of forbidden girls. And as the resemblance took on a refined touch, I took to dreaming about your glinting skin resting within my skin. Your black eyes, their darkness became my life. The restless day spoke of you, the dark night spoke of you, and every existing thing was you - before the muse, before I came to realize I could make of pain a dream. Oh, Jazmín of my childish days, I wish to tell you something, but you are not here. Mirrors watch me wither and brood. Your absence suffocates me. Please come home.

Like Silencing the Wind

for Sushmita Banerjee

Just the age of my daughter,
Sushmita, dragged from her Afghan
home; 1:30 a.m., her husband,
blindfolded and bound,
their shattered door,
open to the wind.

An Islamic madrassa,
near al-Jihad,
witnessed the fifteen bullets
ending forty-five years,
her aid to others.

Brave enough
to marry an Afghan
against her family's wishes;
convert from Hindu to Islam;
write about life
under Taliban control.

Her book, *A Kabuliwala's
Bengalli Wife*, 1989,
retold in 2003—
the Indian film,
Escape from Taliban.

Women—
forced to wear burkas,
not work, nor leave home
without a male escort.
School, forbidden
to a girl.

Her medical dispensary,
closed by the Taliban.
Imprisoned
in a mud brick hut,
she tunnels free,
escapes to India.

Safe, after twenty years,
she rejoins her husband.
The notice of her murder,
September 6th, 2013,

Like Silencing the Wind
carries no banner headlines,
no wake-up calls
against the agents of her death.

Yet, continents apart,
isn't that her voice
in the wind
outside our windows?

English Practice 11

Frenetic poetics edited and embedded in your head when you read it
Demented eccentric presented in semantics, demand it and command them to express it with succor
I suffer every quatrain, when I strain my brain to drain the ink in my pen, write enough for a full
blown novel
Shit, I'm out, I need another bottle
Of ink, stupid, I don't drink
You think I'd do anything to the few working brain cells I have left?
I lost a few sane ones back when my brain was stuck on profane, a domain with no name and yet
everyone knows it
A place where everything is monochromatic
A place where vocabulary is monosyllabic
Psychosomatic
I'm still trying to change the mono to the poly
Trying to be the second coming of Apollo
Trying to make a better tomorrow for the mute youth
Acute ruth
A new food for thought
Nibble on my scribbled scripture, paint a picture better than the Sistine Chapel
Brand new chapter that captures the essence of my presence, it's a menace to the premises of my
nemesis, an endless list of second strings
Beckon things beyond dimensions
Extensions of my expressions
Like puppets on string theory these words are the fundamental description of my nature
Monumental exception to failure
Mathematical impossibility
Can't be negative when I'm a Fibonacci prodigy
Hey, Ma! Are you proud of me?
Profoundly breathed life into my jive hold the turkey
Murky wordy sortie coming at you like a salvo of ammo
Like the series finale of The Sopranos I'm gonna

Teach Me to Draw



Adoption

Hundreds of books
Line shelves
Of the library basement.

Down here,
Darkness reigns.
But I still see those books

Peering back at me—
Desperate, neglected souls
In a time of technology.

Nobody has touched them
For decades.
In an instant, I wonder

If I can take them all home,
Fill my bookcase
And relish them

Page by page, chapter
By chapter; but I know
I can't give them all refuge.

Still, I reach for one
Leaning against the back
In a layer of dust,

Floating away
As I cradle its cover.
Close to me, I hold it

Like a newborn,
Comfort it as I leave
To place it

On my nightstand
And to hear its voice
Again and again.

Musing

The corners of my mouth
Turn up in a smile

As I begin to absorb
Strand's poem before me;

I wonder, Does the speaker
Have blond legs,

Or does he have flaming hair,
Or do these even matter?

Such questions flutter by
Here in this bookish dark

As I revel in the possibility
I'll not plum the poem's depths.

Victor Poem

I loved a woman in white,
But she didn't belong to me.
When my cousin killed her,
I was the one left to grieve.

Philosophers and scientists
Flooded my mind.
Experiments then began
For me to create life.

I covered my hands in dirt,
Trying to find the perfect pieces,
Shaking detached green hands
From those in dirt or among fishes.

With parts put together,
Inside of my apartment,
Electricity came down
And started a monstrous heartbeat.

He paced and I wallowed,
Ashamed of what I created.
So I left and returned
To find the demon vacated.

It was then that I left
To go visit my mournful father.
I knew I was responsible
for the murder of my brother.

Disaster and I met atop
A peak covered with ice.
He threatened me with death,
If I failed to create him a wife.

Rotten, yellow flesh I
Gathered once again.
Then I destroyed the she-devil,
Horried with the idea of their kin.

With my cousin in white
We were finally wed.
But as I waited for death,
She was murdered in bed.

I hunted the creature,
Desperate for vengeance.
Against him or myself?
I'm not sure there's a difference.

Across a tundra on a sled,
I was picked up by a ship.
I told the captain my tale.
For his sake I wasn't loose with my lips.

A lifetime I spent searching,
but I shouldn't have bothered.
For on my deathbed I realized:
That I am the true monster.

Poison

An unwavering cycle constructs my calendar.
It's dictated by the white coats prescription.
My compliance is ensured by the alternative—
If I don't consent to the remedy,
I am merely a marked woman with counted days
and a bulls eye spread across my breast.
A practical choice was not offered to me:
Delve in willingly or wither away,
So, I chose to stay.
Allowing the needle to penetrate my flesh,
The bitter fluids drip in promising to dominate and destroy.
The slithering liquid wreaks havoc almost immediately:
Tainted yellow skin breaks into little flakes,
Eyes blurs with double vision;
My mind floats away as the minutes pass by,
Each increment brings a new conception
That moments later, forgets its origin.
My limbs adhere to gravity,
Sleep weighs me down into submission,
Begging that I stay close to the bedding,
Never to stray too far from the four walled enclosure.
They pump me up with steroids
For one day of each round,
Wire me for sound.
But as Tuesday's darkness takes residence,
The stimulate fades from my spirit.
Fatigue regains its almighty thrown
and settles in for the duration.
A burning sensation climbs up my chest,
It tears at my throat.
An insatiable thirst strips me dry.
The chemicals induce salty secretions nightly,
Sweat laced sheets become ordinary.

My femininity falls to the floor,
Follicles of hair line my pillow case come morning.
A pounding heart pulsates like a drum in my chest,
Beating a swift symphony.
Wind floods my fluttering lungs.
My bones ache as if it were winter.

My fingers and toes tingle until they go numb,
The nerves scream bloody mercy
As they stab me with every step,
Sharp spasms slice through my stomach,
My gut twists and pivots into tightly tied knots.
Gritted teeth clench together to form a barrier
Against the retched acid churning within.
Slow breaths calm a heaving thrust,
It sustains the threatening assault, for now.
My own body has turned against me,
Deeming me a prisoner of myself,
Trapping me inside the symptoms.
Every day is slighted by an onslaught of side effects
Contained by a plethora of pills to ease the severity.
But the poison is still swimming in my blood.
As the venom surfs my veins,
Searching for the disease,
It annihilates every cell in its path.
It's an inevitable casualty of the process,
A tactical line of defense:
Chaos to combat chaos;
Simulated death to save a life.

Auction

After the angels of death,
we come, like miners
shining helmet lamps
into underground veins.

A warehouse:
tables piled high
with glassware and dolls,
and hanging on a wall
a bright red guitar.

We haven't enough
to outbid the others.

Death has no guitar
for its angel.

Nightfall (After Ou Yang Hsiu)

One year ago, my wife
was a healthy, vibrant woman.
Now she's dead.
I've also been unwell.
But it's time I looked ahead.
When it comes, will I
be ready for death?
I look at the fading sunlight.
I watch a sad moon rise.
Far away, distant stars,
like unseeing eyes,
are barely shining.
But even in winter, the river
will not stop flowing.
The falling leaves never end,
and still I write poems,
though no one is left
in my home to read them.

On View at the 9/11 Memorial Museum: A Brick From Bin Laden's Compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan

Bricks can build, wall people in, keep people out.
Bricks can shield, keep secrets, isolate.
Bricks can smash dissidents, act as judge and jury-kill.
Bricks are red as blood.
Bricks can hide murder, hate, terrorism.
Bricks can crumble.

Normandy, the Impossible Made Possible

Into the face of death, they forged our destiny,
Changing the course of history,
Climbing rope up steep rugged cliffs like spiders,
Rushing into the volley they advanced.

As paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines
Like a heavy, April rain,
And The Allies stormed the beaches like gladiators.
Forward! All the way to Germany.

Notice the deep craters that stamp time's immortality.

All is quiet now,
Except crashing waves pounding against a rocky shore.

*This poem is dedicated to Benjamin Vivona who fought in the battle
of Normandy and survived.

Think of Me



"I'm not dead yet," he said, echoing the line from *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, one of our favorite movies. Then he smiled that half-assed, shit-eating, ball-busting, half-grin of his. I must have had that look again. The look that hinted at the reality no one wanted to face. The look that said he'd be gone soon.

"I know that," I replied.

"You're acting like I am."

"I'm sorry."

The Band was playing "The Weight" in the background. *Jeopardy* was on the TV. I was wondering what this world would be like without this goofy guy I'd known since third grade.

"We should go out on tour," he continued. "Call it the 'Not Dead Yet Tour.' Invite the Stones, Van Morrison, Rod Stewart, McCartney, and whoever in The Dead who isn't dead. All those old farts who aren't dead yet, but should be."

I was reading through the diary he'd kept while we traveled through Europe together just after we graduated from UC Davis. He was looking through the photographs we'd taken on that trip. He had gone to see the world one last time before starting work. I had gone to see the world, too, because there was a good chance my next tour would be in Vietnam.

This particular afternoon, we were trying to cover as much territory as we could in the time we weren't sure we had left.

He tried to play flute along with the music, but didn't have enough breath. He tried to eat, but had no appetite. He tried to recite a poem, but couldn't.

"I'd like you to read this at my funeral," he said

"You're not dead yet," I paid him back and smiled.

"Just read it, asshole."

Much too soon after that conversation, a fellow poet and friend read this poem at his funeral because I couldn't.

*Work like me in gratitude
Glad to be alive
Then at the end of all of this
Sing and laugh and cry*

*Think of me – share the smile
The one you can't forget
The smile that lasts past midnight
And know we're not there yet*

*Wrap me up, a gift of God
Lay me in the earth
I've known my life as dark and light
Half of what it's worth
Play like me inspired by
The songs that are your own
Some may try to silence you
But don't stop until you're done*

*Rest like me in fullness
Beyond knowledge, beyond fate
Trust the love that's everywhere
Rest now, sure in faith
Think of me from time to time
When you hear a song
You will know that love's not lost
And I'm not really gone.*

George A. Rogers, "Think of Me"
My best friend would have turned 68 on January 24th.

Gold in a Grave

When I was only eight,
I began to visit the hospital frequently.
Most of the times, I stayed downstairs in the cafeteria eating away.
But sometimes I'd go to the top floor
and visit him inside the white, lifeless room.
The room and he were no different.
His wrinkled face caved into the pillow,
for he no longer was the man I once knew.
My father always says that
time is gold,
but when I was only eight
his father had no more.
We buried him on a cool, September morning.
Father's eyes were piercing, bold and red.
As I walked toward his casket
six feet into the earth,
I grabbed a handful of dirt and
laid him to rest.
I understand now what I've lost.
I've lost lots and lots of gold.
For our time was cut short—
Too short.
And now, in search of what was lost,
I look for gold in a grave.

17

Another tombstone
in the field,
this one
along the highway,
not a fox, not a squirrel,
nonetheless,
one that went too fast.

The Last Eclipse

The television news programs mentioned it casually, as they always did, a light story among the threats and misdeeds exploding around us: a total eclipse of the sun, visible over blah, blah, first in over blah, blah, blah. And don't look at the damn thing straight on, you dolts. Most of us could have recited the story as well as the tanned, lacquered newscasters. But it still reminded me of how big the universe was, and how small my problems were in that context. I knew better than to give my wife that speech again. Her universe was her problems, and diminishing them only served to diminish her eventual triumph over them.

The kids, of course, cared not at all. Games, shopping and sexual reverie kept them busy enough. (On the bright side, my wife loved coping with that. It gave her more to fret about, more conquests to anticipate.)

I happened to be coming back from the deli with my lunch when it began. The streets were a little darker by the time I got back to the office. There was no doltish need to look at the damn thing straight on; you could see it on TV in the lunch room, and on the internet, as well. Slowly the sun was consumed by a curving shadow, until at last it was turned to a ring of light around a plump black center. Then it would start to uncover again. Only this time, it didn't.

There was a lot of chatter at first in the office— fake-science analysis and jokes tinged with nervousness— “they just want to darken our workday even more,” things like that. There were phone calls from nervous mates, parents and children, calls which came more frequently as an hour, then two, went by.

The newscasters were initially bemused, but then more serious. To give them rare credit, they didn't panic. But they discontinued the in-the-street interviews after one woman broke down in tears and fell to the ground. The station didn't break away from that right away, so we all saw the reporter down on her knees, whispering, “It's okay, honey. It's only temporary.” The woman had curled into a fetal position, and wouldn't answer. She pulled her head up from between her arms and howled. Jimmy, the office mailman, dropped his cup of coffee and said, softly, “Jesus.” Then a commercial came on, I don't remember what for.

At 3:30, we were told to go home. The office manager said that we should call in to the message desk after 8:00 PM, and there would be a recording telling us if the office would be opened tomorrow. Several people stayed on for a while (I among them), until the news reported that there had been incidents of violence and looting. We left quickly.

At home, my wife was unusually calm, since she denied that it was happening. “This is impossible,” she told me, while the kids (all home before dinner, for a change) stood around us, finally wanting parents when we could not do a thing. “It's a test of some defensive weapon, or a mass hallucination.” She laughed. “We don't need to break out our tin-foil hats, okay? We'll be fine.” I nodded and told her I was sure it was something like that, and tried to reassure the kids that I meant it. Of course they didn't fall for it for a second, although once they caught on to what I was doing, they pretended too— for their mother's sake.

They are really pretty good kids.

Night fell, and we could not see directly what was happening – or not happening. But the blotted-out sun was on TV, over the Pacific, over Asia. Reports of looting were becoming more frequent. And some small countries were blaming this on some secret weapon (my wife nodded in happy, almost vicious triumph when she heard that) on the United States.

What would happen if some of the bigger countries— the ones with their own mega-weaponry— began thinking like that?

The ring of the sun rose the next morning (I hadn't bothered to call in to the office, I wasn't going away from my family while this was happening), and the family, around the table, ate breakfast in silence. My wife seemed to have given up her weapons notion, even as the kids and I seemed to warm to it. She spoke very little, but she did not seem to me to be afraid. That was a great relief to me, as I wasn't sure what would happen if this went on for days, and I needed her support and strength. We watched the news together for a while, then went into various rooms to watch TV or read. Everybody was checking on somebody else frequently, as if people might disappear as well as the normal uneclipsed sun had.

That afternoon, I went out to buy a gun, but they were all sold or stolen. I got the last two bows and the remaining arrows from Baldwin's, feeling like an idiot, although the salesman nodded. He left the store with me, and warmly wished me good luck as he continued past my car to his own. He had closed the store doors behind him, but I was sure that wouldn't matter.

We practiced archery in the back yard, shooting arrows into an old mattress until my wife came out and shouted that we were ruining it. It had been up in the attic for four years, but no matter. Two days later, I woke up next to her body. An empty bottle of sleeping pills stood next to the clock on her nightstand.

It took six hours for them to come and pick up her body. The kids stayed in the living room, sobbing and whispering. I went on my rounds: from them to the front door to look out, upstairs to her body, sitting beside her and framing questions in my head, which I couldn't voice. I felt a strong urge to remove her wedding ring, as she had removed herself, but left it on her finger. We had been too long together to ever be apart, death be damned.

The next day, when the sun arrived still eclipsed, I felt a strange relief. If things had returned to normal so soon after her death, it would have been.... That might have broken me.

It has been almost a month now, and there have been wars, mass suicides, religious cults springing up overnight, alongside the more traditional religions crying out that our irreligious times have brought this upon us. Stores all over are out of food – I have been as far as five miles away in all directions, in a partnership with a neighbor to whom I'd barely spoken before. I have finally accepted that this is not going to change, that the eclipse is final. Plant life all around us is browning out, though it is nearly June, and there is no future.

I do not let my children know that I believe this way. They have the foolish bravery of youth, and are better off for it. I think my youngest son knows how I feel, something in his eyes touches mine sometimes, almost in sympathy for me. But he goes along with my going along with the others.

We have scraped together a good store of food, and are in a solid partnership with my

neighbor's family. So when my daughter announces that she is pregnant by his son, and they will marry, I just nod and tell them that's fine. It doesn't matter anyway.

Disruption



Those Banyan Trees

In my *hana buttah* days,
we swung from the vines
like Tarzan, watching the red dirt
kick up on our *rubbah slippahs*
as we lifted our feet to soar.
The grooves of the trunk
were of magical design.
Smooth and defined,
cradling our small *okoles*,
scraping our skin
only as much as we resisted
its purpose.
When it rained,
we welcomed the collection
of leaves overhead, an occasional
drop sneaking passed the guards,
reminding us of the elements
but never asking us to leave.
Now I watch where I step,
where the grass has died.
Garbage bag hammocks
have woken me from my dream.
I try to convey the simplicity
of bliss to my child,
but all she sees are the crumpled
plastic bottles tucked in the veins
of its majesty, the vines swaying
so slightly one would mistake
it for the wind, instead of an invitation.

*Hawaiian Pidgin Words:

hana buttah - childhood

rubbah slippahs - rubber slippers, flip flops

okoles – buttocks

Mendocino Silver Haze



The Cows Gaze Out in Unison

The cows gaze out in unison
over pasture and pond,
their white heads identical,
their brown hides grouped
on a green sward.

Their large blue eyes focus
on the same unknown object.
They cluster by the salt box
hay shelter.

A road winds back
to a white fence.
Green hills rise into woods.

The cows are not afraid;
they are only looking.

All look the same way and hold it there,
as if they weren't individuals,
as if they were all one cow.

1 Watch the Sunset (After Su Tung Po)

I watch the sun set
behind snow-shrouded trees.
The moon rises, moving
at a leisurely pace,
then vanishes without
a trace, and the night
becomes a spiteful place.
Winter has an ugly face.
Or so it seems to me
at seventy-three.
But I'm still here.
I'll look toward spring.
It's not much, but
from where I am at,
it seems a glorious thing.

Shadow and Quay

A rare morning—
the remnants of moon cross-hatch the pillow
on which her husband sleeps. She listens for the calm breath
that means he is traveling somewhere lovely in dream.
She touches his hand, he holds hers instinctively.

An unusual May dawn, the breeze floats through curtains
open to the peaceful day. She smells hearth smoke
rising from her neighbor's house, hears the morning birds—
the far off sound of steady song, a mockingbird nearby,
and always, the sea.

Soon she will know the place on the quay that scents
of rusted anchorage. She will watch the shadow
of storms against roughened plaster, she will see
the metronome ticking out the rhythm to a Celtic fiddle song
but she will not hear any of it.

And so this dawn, she memorizes her peaceful man;
imagines where the birds have lead him. She quiets
and treasures her own breath, where breath and heart
form a chapel. Where the music of remembrance is made,
where it will never be forgotten.

The Fringe



What it Takes to Watch a Mushroom Sprout Up Out of Nowhere

A tolerance
for rain,

the patience
of dirt,

most of all,
belief
in trolls
with a map of nowhere.

Living Through an Off Day

Is a boulder-push up a steep hill.
My hands end up damp with moss
And misery.

At the bus station,
I don't know
Where to direct my gaze;
Too many people
With too many faces.
I feel foreign in my legs.
My arms are limp trimmings—
Extra weight
I can't find a use for.
There's a sense of weighty
Emptiness in my torso.
Like ghosts in my chest.

Ghosts of words I almost said.
Ghosts of smiles I almost brandished.
Ghosts of questions lodged in my esophagus.

Instead I'm left with
Lungs that feel like fish robbed of oceans,
And a dribbling mouth,
Where words like gasping waterfalls
Sputter at my feet.

What I Want From You

Sublime smiles surrounding our mouths.
As sensual sunshine skips on our skin.
Petite pebbles pirouetting across the pond.
As ducks dance and dive down after them.

Fights over who forgot to pay the electric bill one breath,
And making love in candle light the next.
Discovering we're pregnant but not prepared
For the unbridled bliss of becoming parents.

Sons who scream with sincere savagery
As they strike makeshift shields with sticks like swords.
Daughters who don't wear princess dresses,
But do dance with dad on their wedding day.

A lifetime of walks back to this dainty duck pond.
Yet, now as the ducks witness my proposal take place
From the heart of the clear rippling water,
What I want from you, is to say yes.

Rickety



At Stake

I set fire to my poems;
They curl in upon themselves
And then drift
Into the skies as ashes.

Alarmed, my editors
Shout at me
To leave the poems alone,

But I can't stop myself.
I must share these verses
With the heavens,
And I envision this way

As the only way of getting
Them to the celestials
Fast enough.

I Thought She was Fire

for J.

At last, this big-leaf maple
on my path, dry leaves, red, black,
and ochre. At last, low waves
on the sides of black rocks
slide down again. I can't know

the debts you owed.
Deep in the lake, yellow-brown
boulders. I pick up a leaf,
crush its pale, scarlet tent
to my lips. Allegedly,

you took your life. Your body.
“They sprinted it away,”
said your friend. The sun on blue
water reflects off a sandstone
cliff, which shimmers,

licks at gray lichen. One green leaf
rocks in the light, unquiet.
I turn this stem in in my fingers.
Not a child's sparkler,
a spark. Beneath the falls,

white bodies of water
pour from the other world
and break the surface, unquiet.
Forgive me: who can touch
your soul of water?

Evolution

Walking home,

I see
tadpoles
in a rainwater puddle

I pass every day.

Watch them grow
and the puddle
shrink

and wonder

which will
go

first

The Monster on My Floor

There was a monster on my floor. It's kind of hard to describe what it looked like; you really had to be there. But take my word for it: there was a monster, and it was on my floor. I was pretty brave about it, all things considered. It's not every day you wake up and see a monster on your floor. I mean, it wasn't all that big or scary but it was definitely a monster and it was definitely on my floor. It was, uh...I dunno, slimy, I guess? Monster-like? And it had these sharp teeth.

Okay, full disclosure: I peed myself a little bit. The brave part was a lie. But everything else was true. Especially the part about the monster. And the floor. So after I was done urinating and coming to the conclusion that there was definitely a monster and it was definitely on my floor I found myself wondering what exactly I should do. I wasn't afraid for my life in the immediate future. It was too small to climb up on my bed. But I knew, I just knew that if I stepped onto my floor it would kill me and eat me. I can't really explain how I knew, but if you've ever had a monster on your floor you get where I'm coming from.

So anyways I'm sitting up on my bed, my boxers damp and my right leg uncomfortably warm, and my mom opens the door to my room and I freak out because I'm in my underwear and there's a monster on my floor. And she looks down. And she looks up at me with this look of horror on her face and she says to me, very seriously: "Clean up your room."

I didn't, by the way, not that that's a super important part of the story. Instead, I reached for the jar that my friend Susan left in my room after she brought cookies over the other day, and I put it over the monster. It thrashed and screamed and did other monster-like things but it was too small and ineffectual to do any damage to the jar. But it was totally worth peeing over, I swear.

So now I had a monster and it was in a jar, so I could safely get out of bed and then I had the conundrum of what to do with the monster. It was too big to throw away and the garbage can was full and the nearest dumpster was like three blocks away. Instead I called my friend Susan over because she was the kind of person who knew what to do in any situation and also the monster was in her jar so it was basically her problem now and I ought to have been a good friend and help her deal with it.

When Susan came over, I invited her into my garage because my mom clearly didn't notice that there was a monster and that it was on my floor and it was early, so I didn't really want to trouble her with that kind of thing because first you have to come to the weird realization that monsters exist and that to get on my floor it was very possible that it had to crawl out from under my bed and that would mean she lied to me when I was eight and I just wasn't in the mood to have that kind of emotional conversation because there was a monster in my friend Susan's jar.

So anyways, when Susan arrived she was still wearing her pajama top and sweats which was kind of hot and I totally had a thing for her so I almost forgot about the monster situation but it's really difficult to forget when your friend/crush has a monster in her cookie jar so I got back on that train of thought pretty quickly.

When I showed Susan the jar, she just kind of looked at it for a couple seconds the way you look at a math problem that you should have learned the equation for on a day that you missed class because you ate too many pot stickers and got sick; you know the look. So she had that look for a second and then she looked at me and she said: "You didn't clean my jar."

And I looked at her the same way and then I told her that that's really not the issue and she says that it's really rather rude to return a jar that someone lent you without washing it first, or even getting rid of the crumbs, and she had a point but maybe if she realized that the only reason I didn't clean it was because of the monster that now resided in it she wouldn't have been so mad. But she was mad and no matter how much I tried to convince her that the monster was more important she wouldn't hear it and no matter how much she tried to convince me that the crumbs were more important I wouldn't hear it so nobody got anywhere and Susan went home.

Things were getting pretty desperate now because I had a monster in a jar and a mad friend/crush and this was easily turning into the third worst morning of my life (trumped only by the Pajama Party Incident and the Buttered Toast Debacle) so I broke down and went to tell my father about the monster. He and I didn't always get along, but he liked to read a lot so he was probably the kind of person who knew what to do with a monster in a jar.

When I found him he was standing in the backyard, hands on his hip, staring at a hole in the fence contemplatively. I knew I was in luck because he was upset about the fence and it seemed pretty likely that this monster caused the hole in the fence so we had a common enemy. So when I told him I had an issue and he asked if it could wait until he figured out the fence situation, I excitedly thrust the jar toward him and told him I knew what caused it. He looked at me, eyes wide with curiosity, jaw slack with wonderment, and said: "Can you just get me my tool box?"

Frustrated and realizing that my situation was beyond hope, I took the monster back to my room, and decided to just keep it. It was kind of ugly, but I guess it would have been rude to just get rid of it. If a stray kitten walked into my room, I'd probably want to take care of it, so why treat this monster any different? That would be racist. Species...ist? Anyways, keeping it did cause me a bunch of problems, though. Susan got mad that I never gave her the jar back and said I was a bad friend even though I explained to her that I was keeping my pet monster in it. My mom got mad because taking care of a pet monster was a lot of work and my room got messy. My father got mad because holes kept reappearing in the fence, and he didn't understand that my monster needed to get some exercise, and sometimes that resulted in fence holes. No matter how hard I tried to explain it, nobody really understood or cared about my monster.

Honestly, I've been getting kind of worried about my monster lately. It looks at me kind of

Murder Mystery

The young woman, wearing a bathrobe over her nightgown and slippers on her feet, turned on the kitchen light and walked over to the refrigerator. She opened the door and wondered what she might have for a midnight snack. Glancing at the green display of the clock above the oven door, she corrected herself— *No, make that a 2 a.m. snack.* She pushed aside cheeses and leftover chicken. She had just spied a piece of chocolate cake on a plate, covered with clear wrap, when a strong sensation went through her that she was being watched. She straightened up, her right hand still atop the refrigerator door and looked at the dark windows. No, nothing there that she could see. She looked all around the kitchen and saw nothing out of the ordinary: just the row of cookbooks she rarely used, the kettle on the right front burner of a cold stove, a few dishes in the sink to wash in the morning—*the real morning*, she smiled to herself—and the strainer of potatoes she had washed and left on the counter for a recipe she was going to try out for that evening’s neighborhood potluck dinner. The potatoes were a bit on the small side, she mused, but that just might suit the recipe even better than the regular-sized potatoes it called for. The woman thought about this a moment, looked at the windows a second time, shrugged and turned back to the refrigerator. Behind her, in the strainer, one lid, and then another, and then another, slid open.

The potatoes have eyes.

A few hours later, in the bright sun of a new morning, Detective Ed Mackie and his partner stood in the middle of the kitchen as a forensics team worked all around them. Neighbors had called 911 in response to loud screams from the house around 2 a.m., but the team had turned up nothing—no body, no blood, no signs of forced entry, no signs of a struggle; just an open refrigerator door. Detective Mackie furrowed his brow.

His partner asked, “Whaddya think, Ed?”

Mackie shook his head. “Beats me. Hey, Wilkerson”—he addressed the leader of the forensics team. Wilkerson looked up from his fingerprint dust—“you finished here?” Mackie nodded toward the refrigerator.

“Yeah, boss. You can close that.”

Mackie pushed the door shut as his partner walked across the kitchen toward a strainer of potatoes on the counter.

“Hey, Ed, get a load of these suckers.”

Mackie walked over and they both looked down at the exceptionally large potatoes heaped high over the top edge of the strainer.

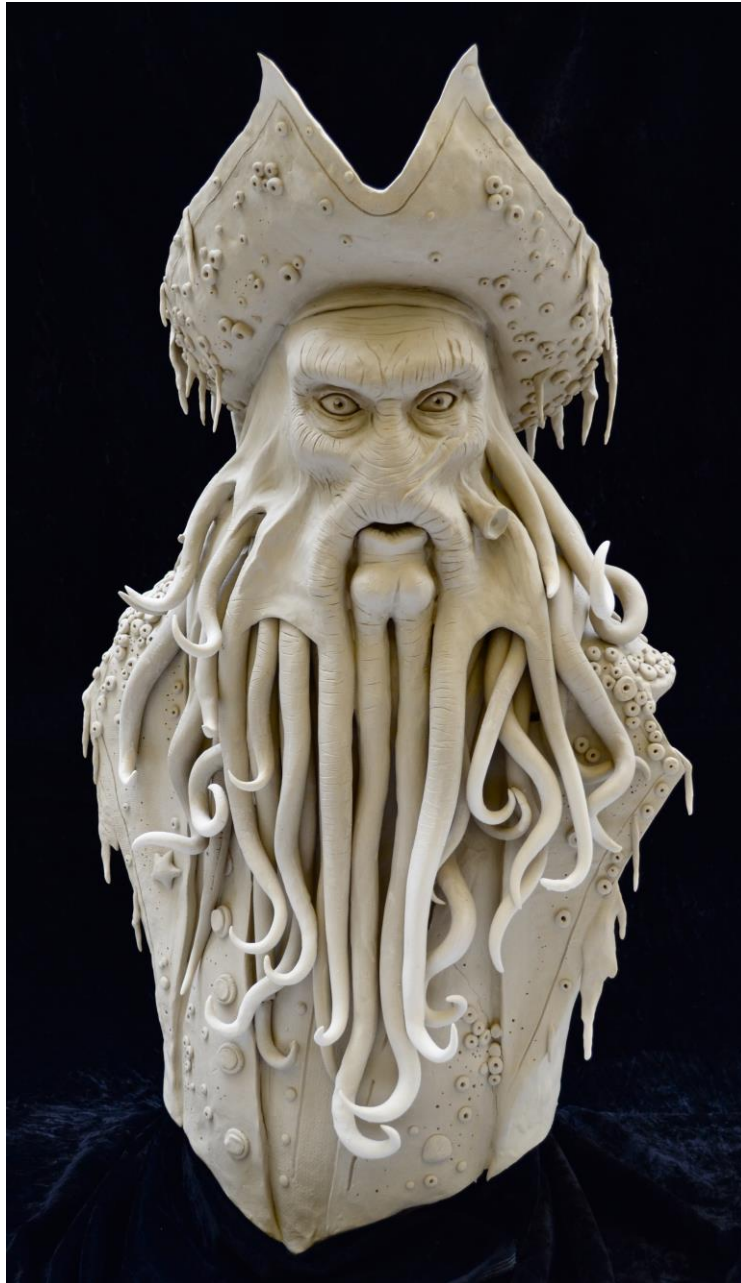
“I wonder where she bought them,” his partner said. He poked one with a finger. “Tender, too; I wouldn’t even need a steak to go with one of these.”

Mackie smiled sardonically. “You and your appetite.”

They both turned away and continued their work. Behind them, in the strainer, one lid, and then another, and then another, slid open.

The potatoes have eyes

Davy Jones



Dear Mother

One who stripped me of my fears,
And piled my regrets
Into the bags under your eyes.
One who cooked pozolé
Just the way I liked it.
A little lemon on top,
Your way of cauterizing my wounds.

One who eased aches
With her touch.
One who brewed tea
And sang me to sleep.
One who held my hand
With a grip so strong,
It could only come from
The paralyzing fear
That I'd let go.

Dear Mother, I resented
Your tender care.
Your love was fastened
To my hip,
Like a belt I could not undo.
You kept locks of braided hair
In Ziploc bags.
You filled cupboards
Full of cups,
Stocking up on ounces
Of years
That grew into miles.
You raised me in your arms.
In the warmth of your blanket
Of paranoia.

Mother I resented you.
But Mother, I understand you.
I realize now that somewhere
In your genetics

There was a twist in the DNA
That caused your incessant
Addiction to collect and protect.
That your children are your life,
And your objects are your surrogates.

I am more than a keepsake.
Neither I nor my love
Will fade with the army
Of Polaroids
In your photo albums.
I am solid bone,
And flesh that pimples
In anticipation of wind.
I'd like to spread my fingers
Across the horizon
And realize what's there.

Dear Mother,
Please let me grow.

Dear Mother,
I'm sorry I resented you.

Dear Mother,
Thank you for assuring
My survival.
For bartering with the devil
When my mental annuity
Was scarce.

But now I need to
Teach myself
To live
Without fear.
To live
On my own.
To realize my life
Is more than years
Collected in a box

My Mother's Funeral

Propped on his hip,
My father's arms wrapped 'round my waist,
I stared in wonder.

The vision before me—
the plastic waxy sheen,
like a Barbie doll,
Limbs bound back by twine.

Her container open for the world—
I cried.

Pressed my cheeks
against my father's chest—
an angry oven
about to quit.

Broken



Mother's Day

The emptiness around us
forms a solid presence:
I can shave my face
with a memory,
wash my hands
in her eyes;
one morning every year
I'm allowed to plant color
back into dead flowers,
warmth back into
the cemetery bench.

Lullaby for the Damned

Go ahead and scream, little one,
while your voice still holds an echo.
Wail yourself violently
into a peaceful sleep
and dream
that this house we share has ears.

It is okay to thrash
your tiny arms and legs
and eyes and soul
impotently in the air.
It is okay.
I will thrash with you.
I have never stopped
thrashing
or wailing.
It is all that remains
from what we're given.

Now lay your weightlessness here on my chest
and listen to what must sound like my heart.
It has not been *a heart* or *mine* for many years.
But it can still beat in you.

Red Inside

On a whim, at the end of a long morning, you stop your car outside of a styling salon. You lift your hair, straight and heavy, off your neck, and for a moment, you feel the cool leftover breeze of the air conditioning hit your skin. Holding it like that, clenched in your fist. Your hair suddenly seems the cause of the droop in your shoulders, the dull ache in your temples, the pain at the base of your back. Short hair would make it all better: all that caring, the tending, the fetching.

You glance in the rearview mirror. All is well, he is quiet, and you let your hair fall, considering. It wouldn't take that long. How long could it take? Not too long.

It would feel so good.

Dangling your keychain, you step out of your strawberry Neon and hit the little remote control button whose beep announces to the world that you're somebody; you have things that need to be safely locked away. You tap quickly on the tinted back window, the dark offering shade, you think, then smile and touch your finger to your lips.

Inside the salon, you look through hairstyle magazines, marveling at all the different ways to wear hair, and you wish you could look that tousled, that curly, that easily beautiful. You sigh and check your watch. The long mirror behind the counter reflects your shiny red car and you watch the black window, dark and cool, you think. Eventually, the stylist calls your name and you take one more quick glance out the storefront before you go to the chair.

She asks how you'd like it and you say, "Short," nodding at a poster, mounted almost to the ceiling. "Like that," you say and automatically loosen your lips in the model pout and draw your eyebrows down.

The stylist smiles and runs a hand through your waist-length hair, tickling your scalp. "That short?" she asks.

"Yes, and red," you say, "red like that," and you point to a burnished hunk of synthetic hair, hanging on a little rack among gold and chestnut, ginger and jet. "Auburn Sunset," she says and you nod. How wonderful, you think, how wonderful to leave here with a head full of Sunset.

Sun shining in, falling gray-white on toes. She's gone. Wiggle and kick. Warm skin, warm hands, warm feet. Drips and drops slide down cheeks and nose. Shake head, shake head, wipe away.

Hum a little. Then sing. Wheels on the Bus. If You're Happy and You Know It. Touch the wet. Taste. Like potato chips. Like pretzels. Like popcorn.

You feel the stylist pull and tug your hair, lift it, cut it, let it drop. The scissors chime and your plain brown hair falls in rhythm, sliding on the pink shininess of your plastic cape. You wonder how you will look when she's through. You wonder if you will change.

You glance at the clock and think, *Not too much time. Not too long now.*

Wiggle. Straps stick tight. Arms slippery, face slick. Breathe, but only breathe hot. Hot air with a rosy glow.

So sleepy.

She wraps a cotton headband along your hairline, and you are horrified, looking in the mirror. Your face, lined by the puffy white, looks odd, stark, void. Where did you go? You glance at the clock, you look toward the window. “How much longer?” you ask.

The stylist shrugs. “Not much. Color next. Then dryer. Then done.”

She has mixed your Sunset, stirred it into a Styrofoam bowl, and you wonder if it will start smoking. You think briefly of the old witch poem chanted when you were young and dressed for Halloween: bubble, bubble, toil and trouble, and your horror leaves, replaced by a smile so like the child you used to be.

She starts painting your hair with the red, the red that looks so dark on her paintbrush; you swear you feel the heat. It soaks your scalp and runs down to puddle against the cotton and you wonder if it will seep under, if your skin will be streaked with it. If your face will be Auburn Sunset, if your eyes will glow red like the setting sun from the dye soaking through to your brain.

Bubble, bubble, you think. Toil and trouble.

So sleepy. Eyes close. See red. Red inside.

Mama.

She leaves you for a long time under the forced heat. The clock is just out of your sight, just above the rim of the dryer, and you wonder about the time passing. The heat from the red, you think, and the heat from the blasted air encasing you in white noise. Afterwards, she rinses your hair for what seems like hours under a hot blast of water. Even the steam sparkles red and you imagine yourself in an aura of auburn, a ruby sheath. “Lady in Red”, you hum, and the stylist looks down and grins as she twists the brown forever out of your hair. “It’s gonna look good,” she says. “It’s gonna look real good.”

Mama!

So sleepy.

You step outside and the heat lands hard on your newly bare neck. You toss your head in the old way and feel light feathers, a tickle, instead of the heavy lift and settle of plain brown hair down your back. It only takes a second to feel the summer sweat gather, trickle in a line down your nape to your spine, and you wonder if it leaves a sunset tattoo. Using a tissue, you blot your neck and face and then walk quickly to the car, reach out to tap the tinted window, that window, you think that promises

cool. It offers shade. Even in the heat, dark offers shade, right? Your smile in the window's reflection shows the child you used to be. Your red hair shows who you are now. You bend low and wave.

In the heat, you freeze.
Oh, the red.
Oh, the red inside.

Habits

My step-mother and I
parked ourselves on the tattered bench
beneath the shroud of the Loquat tree
in her backyard.

We gorged on gouda,
guzzled wine,
and reminisced
about the time we each crashed our cars
on the same day
as if we had something in common.

I studied my step-mom
her straw hat of hair,
the crow's feet clinging to the corners of her eyes,
a face aged 40 years
from chemo and drinking.

Groping the bottle of wine,
she empties it into my glass
and says
“Drink up.”

That's okay,
I've had enough.

Migrant Mothers

To Dorothea Lange and Florence Thompson

It is a challenge to like a living,
heavy-breathing,
nasty-screaming,
stinky-sweating,
stubbornly clutching-to-life woman
doing her best guarding her nest,
feeding her children,
her husband,
and herself.

It is so much easier to like her after she is gone,
enriching indifferent humankind
with her photographs
and her daughters
who, despite seeing a difficult mother
as an annoying, dumb thing,
will keep the Earth spinning
by heavy-breathing,
nasty-screaming,
stinky-sweating,
stubbornly clutching to life,
tempting and seducing men
to produce more women.

An East Coast intellectual and an illiterate Cherokee,
melting together,
sharing their heavy-breathing,
nasty-screaming,
stinky-sweating,
and unbearable pain
in the immortal photograph.
Migrant Mother and Mona Lisa—
the chosen sisters
with their enigmatic and
indecipherable smiles.

My Father, King Kong

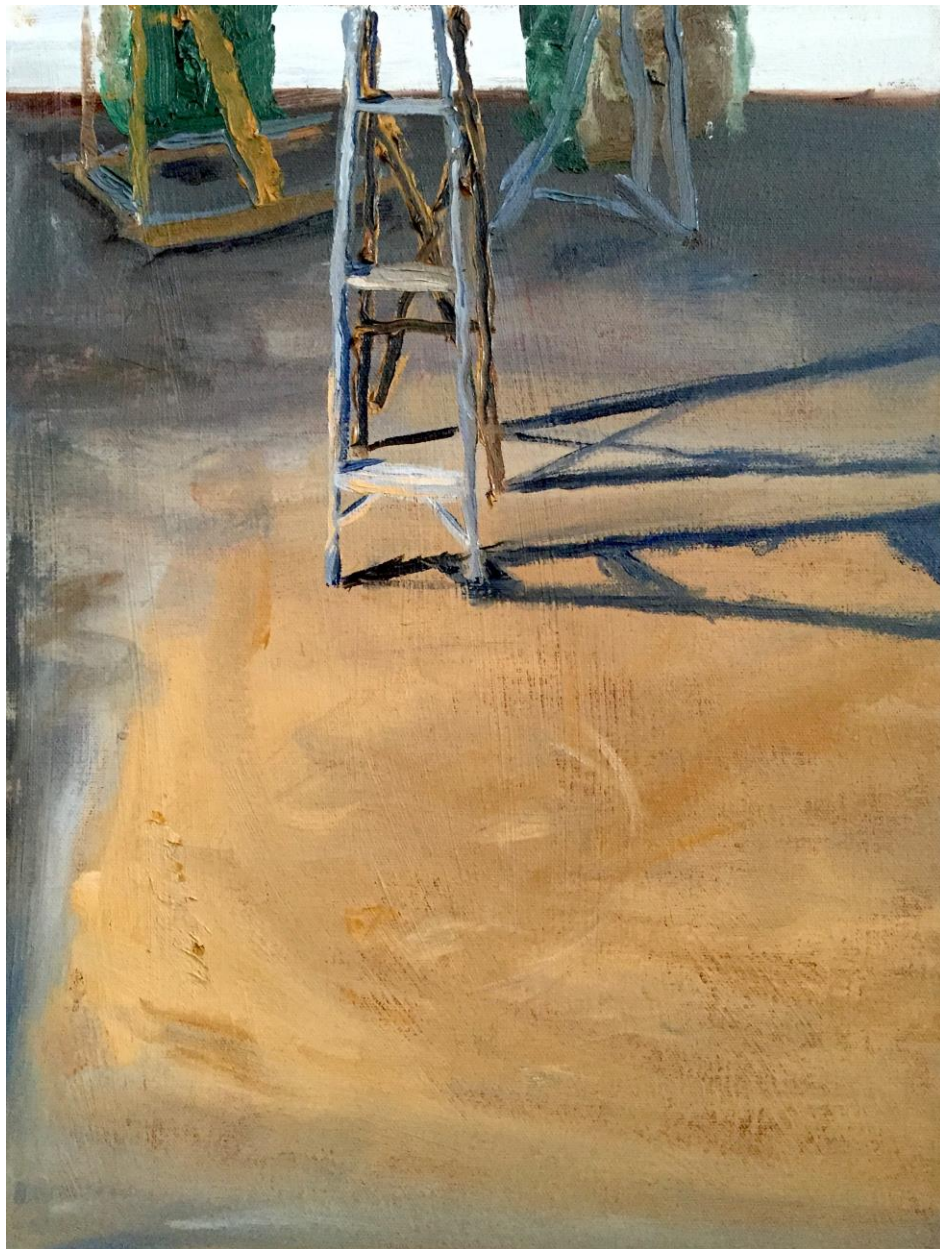
As a child,
My afternoons were spent
Waiting for my father.
When he'd come home,
Caked in sweat and cement,
He'd call us over
To take his shoes off.
My siblings and I
Would gather at his feet
Like we were getting ready
To wash them.
My tiny fingers would struggle
To undo the laces.
The smell of alcohol on his breath,
Like the signal of blush
At dawn,
Would fill the house
The way the sun would
The morning.

That house.
A tiny shell, our first in Modesto.
Earwax yellow.
Inside, the wallpaper only a fool
Would mistake for real wood;
Peeling.
It was sliding closet doors I'd get my hair caught
in.
A mirror on that door where I made faces
Or watched my sibling's reflections
Argue about who got to be Mario next.
That house--
The one our father drank in
And stretched his paycheck for.

My ultimate comfort during those years
Was when my father would hoist
Me up into his sun-charred arms.
Arms that built walls before the sun rose.
They used to call him King Kong in L.A.
And I guess I did feel like a tiny thing
In his arms,
As I'd study the dirt road
Beyond our front gate,
My nose buried in his neck,
Where the smell of Old Spice aftershave
Hit me like a lullaby.

He'd never scale the Empire State, though,
Or the Golden Gate.
Pressed images of his boots,
All over San Jose,
Imprints in Concrete.
Fingerprints in drywall.

High Anxiety



Doomed from 'I Do'

I backed into a corner and sunk to the ground, burying my face between my knees. Tears flooded me. I thought to myself, *this may be the end*. He hissed, the smell of rum lingering on his warm breath, almost intoxicating me, "Get up, you untrustworthy, dirty bitch. You don't love me. You never did love me, did you? Why can't you accept me for who I really am? You don't deserve my love. Party and enjoy life with me. Bitches would jump on a chance to be with me. You're no better than me, you straight-edge cunt. I need a down girl, a true road dog. You are the worst fucking mistake I have ever made. Trust me, honey, I've made a lot of bad ones." His words stung like biting fire ants.

Daniel and I were once very happy. A mutual friend introduced us via the internet when she moved from California to Texas. Daniel happened to be her boyfriend's roommate. As an E4 in the Infantry for the United States Army stationed in Ft. Hood, Texas, Daniel was already intriguing. In September of 2008, I officially met him while visiting my friend Jamie. Daniel was extremely handsome and quite charming. Standing at 6'1" his structure was masculine. His eyes were sea-foam green with what looked like an explosion of sand around the pupil. Kissed with light freckles, his skin was perfect. Another attractive trait was his nose. It was straight, not too big nor too small. I've always had a thing for a nice nose. That crooked little smile of his could draw me in from a hundred miles. We also had a lot in common, too. The love for traveling and being outdoors ran deep in both of us. Finally, I thought I found someone who could keep up with me.

The weekend of my stay in Texas was filled with hanging out at the lake with good people and new friends. We laughed, shared stories, and watched the sun fade over the lake. Daniel asked questions about California, as I did South Carolina. I liked that he was different. Both of us knew the weekend would soon end and I'd be on a plane back to California. He'd be starting intense training for his second deployment to Iraq. We promised to keep in contact, but as his training grew more intense, the communication fell short. Daniel deployed in January of 2009. At that point, I hadn't heard from him since mid-November. The thought of us becoming more than acquaintances fled my mind.

In February of 2009 around Valentine's Day I received an email from Daniel. I was sure it was a small note of him arriving safely and saying hello. I was wrong. He wrote about how he kicked himself in the ass for not trying to pursue a relationship with me sooner. He wrote, "I think of you a lot, Alana. You're like no one I have ever met. You're a shining star." I melted at the thought of this. The end of the letter read, "Will you be my girl?" Of course, I was quick to say, "Thought you'd never ask," along with how excited I was to see where this would lead.

He jerked me up off the ground by my sweatshirt. Terrified, all I could do was shriek while he shook my body. As I caught my balance, I shoved him. Hardly affected, he grabbed for me. He caught me by my hoodie, ripping it as he pulled me closer. He sneered, "Think you're going to get away from me so easy?" Quickly, I tore away running to the bedroom of the boat and locked myself in. The door was frail. It surely wouldn't hold him for long. What was I going to do now? The only way out was through him. No way would I escape him twice.

Daniel was pounding on the door. Had I not opened the door myself he would tear it down. My heart pounded like the hooves of a thousand race horses. I told myself his anger would only get worse if I didn't open the door. I suppose this is how I reasoned with myself. Unlocking the door, I let it

swing open, and there he was standing crazed over me. I tried to push past him. With brute force he grabbed me by the throat, digging his fingertips into my airway. I gasped, and he slammed my body on the bench of the boat. As he pinched harder on my throat I cried, “Ple-s-don-kil-m...” Roxy, my pit bull, charged for Daniel’s hands. She bit him on the leg, causing him to release me.

“Fucking mutt,” he yelled, turning his focus towards her.

I tucked both legs to my chest and kicked him square in the jaw with both feet. As the force of the blow shuffled him back, I saw the rage in his eyes. His veins swelled like pressure in a flat hose. It was like nothing I had ever seen. His lip curled into a snarl and his fist tightened.

I scrambled up from the bench and fled for my car keys sitting on the counter by the small stove. I climbed out of the narrow hatch as quickly as humanly possible. I called frantically, “Roxy girl, come. Hurry girl.” She was right there, slipping and sliding behind me. I jumped over the safety rail and grabbed her off the ledge and ran.

Daniel roared, “Where do you think you’re taking my dog?”

We ran up the marina in the downpour of rain, trying not to slip. The dock shifted with each rush of the waves and wind. I couldn’t hear if Daniel was following and I didn’t want to find out. When we reached my car, Roxy and I were soaked to the bone. My shirt clung to me and my pants sagged. I had none of my belongings and I didn’t know that I would ever get them back. I opened the door in a panic and Roxy and I jumped in, driving off as fast as I could. Rain fell so heavy I could hardly see five feet in front of the car. I was terrified. I had just dodged what seemed to be hell. Now I was struck driving through it.

I drove uncertain of where to go. I hadn’t been in South Carolina for more than a few months. I didn’t know many people. I found myself pulling up to the ranch where I had just gotten a job. It was safe. Daniel had no clue where it was. As I pulled into the parking lot, my phone rang off the hook. Daniel called my phone back to back for what seemed like hours. Sometimes I would ignore the call on purpose, so he knew I was getting them but didn’t care to talk. My phone silenced for a minute when I heard the ding of a new voicemail. It was probably him saying he was sorry, typical.

I clicked ‘play message’ and heard, “Alana, you stupid crazy bitch, I will find you.” He laughed an evil, drunken laugh and added, “You can run, but you can’t hide.”

Daniel and I had married in April of 2009, two months after we started dating. He got his two-week leave and wanted me to visit him in North Carolina and meet his mother, then to travel down to South Carolina so I could meet his father. Excited, I jumped on the invite because he always talked so highly of the south and its history. I couldn’t wait to enjoy it with him. The trip was everything I thought it would be and more. I loved his family and fell head over heels for Daniel. He was such a Southern gentleman. The whole thing felt like a fairy tale. He asked me to marry him on the fourth day of our two-week trip. I was always a free spirit and needed no one’s approval, so I said yes.

Daniel returned to Iraq after his two-week leave. I returned to California. We talked all the time and I believed we had a once-in-a-lifetime kind of love. As time passed, he began to change. I noticed small, odd things. Our only communication was via telephone or internet, but I knew something was

up by his voice. Oftentimes, he sounded drunk or high and was extremely agitated. Then he would tell me I was cheating on him. I was so blown away. I reassured him I would never. I loved him. I'd never cheat on him. Other times, he would be overly happy. Daniel would talk to me about starting a family and naming our first-born son Memphis Alexander Fernell. He had hopes of buying a house and living the American dream. Sometimes I just flat out could not understand him. He'd slur his words, giggle, and fade off for minutes at a time. I felt a hole grow in the pit of my chest. I never did question him, though I did daily in my own mind. I did not want to hear the truth.

Later I learned from a wife of someone in his brigade that Daniel was stealing valium from the Iraqi clinic. He would also drink on duty and chug Robitussin by the bottle. When I finally had enough of pretending everything was normal and confronted him, he brushed it off as passing time. He would say, "Ain't no thang but a chicken wing." Other times, he denied it. We fought constantly about it until I gave him an ultimatum. Me or the party life. He told me he would straighten up. Things would be good for two to three weeks, and then suddenly turn sour. I couldn't keep track of his mood swings anymore. He was ruining my happily ever after.

I thought that after returning home Daniel would get better, but it got worse. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. I didn't know this about him, or how serious it was. He started to avoid our relationship, asking about annulment. I can recall Daniel shutting off all ties from his family and friends, even myself, lashing out in anger at his parents for his childhood, and telling his friends to "fuck off" because they had their own lives. He often told me he wanted a divorce. It was all something I did not understand.

He would say, "Alana, I don't give two shits about my family. They left me when I needed them most, anyways. None of them care. No one cares." How could I convince him that we did care? We just didn't know how to show it when he shunned us so many times before.

Of course, a few weeks would go by and he would apologize, and the next day lash out again. Daniel would plea for family, friends and loved ones to accept his apologies. He'd say, "I'm sorry, I was just having a rough day. I don't mean what I say. Just forget I said it." I'd hear him promise that was the last time he would lash out. "I'll get help. I promise I'm going tomorrow," he once told his father.

I tried so hard to keep him and his family and friends close. I made sure we made phone calls to his father and mother. We wrote letters to his grandmother. I masked the pain we were really going through so they wouldn't worry. I thought I could pull him from the blackness. Maybe if one person stuck around and showed him how much they cared, he would come out of it. It was all a pattern repeating itself. As soon as he took a sip of his cold Bud Light, the cycle started all over again.

In addition to the PTSD, I also learned Daniel had severe ADHD. I had no idea of what this actually was, besides being hyper. He told me that it was the reason he smoked marijuana and drank. He needed it. It helped him to relax. No wonder why he never followed through with anything. I never thought of connecting the two. Daniel smoke and drank, hand in hand. He was either double fisting alcohol, or chain smoking. ADHD I could live with, but the fact it came with drinking, smoking and pot, I could not.

PTSD and ADHD were only two of his issues. Come to find out he also had borderline personality disorder. His behavior showed it all. Daniel was impulsive. He would drink rather than eat. When he chose to eat, he would binge and purge. A few times he threatened to kill himself so I didn't have to put up with him. How would I wrap my head around this? How would I fix him? I was scared he would kill himself, kill me.

Daniel would tell stories about war and the thrill of killing. He would even laugh. Seconds later, he would be crying about how he did wrong to innocent people. Sure signs of bipolar disorder. It was like living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He was intimidating 24/7. Still, I stayed with him. My duty as a wife was to help him through his distress. I needed to be there for him to lean on, to protect him.

Many times I offered to move where a great rehab facility was. I'd work full time and promised I would give him a safe place to lay his head at night. He didn't believe he needed all that. He would say, "Damn, Alana, get off my fucking back. I deserve to have a few cold ones. I've protected you and this country. I deserve it." He wanted to be a pirate at one point. He'd say, "I'm going to set out to sea and drink rum all day, and throw you to the sharks." He had to know this was not normal behavior.

Unfortunately, I didn't wake up one day and know what it was I had to do. Daniel and I split up five or six times.

I had not talked to Daniel in ten months, the longest we had gone. A strange number called my phone from Massachusetts. I answered and to my surprise it was Daniel. We decided we would try one last time. He thought he had himself under control. He said, "Baby, I'm so sorry. Being out on the sea has made me see clear. I need you." I booked a flight that night. He would be coming back to California to work on our marriage. But he missed his flight. I felt no emotion. How could he mess this up again this soon? I knew within three weeks of him arriving we needed to say goodbye.

Through the years I learned my lesson. It wasn't clear until roughly two years ago. The relationship I had with Daniel taught me to stand up for myself. Never would I let someone have so much power over me. I would never again be caught in a web of drug and alcohol abuse. Nobody would lay a hand on me and be welcome in my life again. The biggest lesson I learned though is to fully know who someone is before going off and marrying him.

My divorce was final on November 30, 2013.

Untitled



Comfort

A door opens. The scent of gin creeps
into the room. In the glow of the drunk's
flashlight, a girl and I lock harder.
If the address of your natural dad
was the bed of any woman too lonely to sleep,
and the dwelling of your original mom
was a jacket tied at the arms,
and you were a dossier
stored in a fake home for outcasts,
and the literature of your court-appointed parent
was a liquor label, you would fear
what you might reveal. Encountering a body
and locking, you would steal comfort.

Naming Ritual

Peten Basin, Guatemala, 6000 BC

In the beginning,
babies' heads
are bound with soft woven fabric.
Fathers' fingers
push and prod
soft skulls.

Each night, the father presses
a wooden plank
to his sleeping child's forehead,
flattens it
to the shape of his own forehead
and that of his father
and his father's father,
to the beginning.

Wicked Stepsister

The tears for my stepfather were shed too many years ago to remember. Except I do remember. My mother once said of a former friend, “I forgive but I don’t forget.” I do neither.

Still, the rain drumming on the coffin lid feels like an insult. It’s barbaric, this ritual, of putting people into the ground, planting them as if they were seeds encased in hard shells. Nothing to harvest here but grief and revenge.

W.S. stands on the other side of the grave, sobbing into a black-fringed handkerchief, still beautiful at 58. She’s all in black, from the silk umbrella, silver tipped like a lightning rod, down to the Prada boots, sinking in muddy grass. She’d best hang onto those boots. Soon she’ll be shopping for shoes at Wal-Mart.

W.S. stands for “Wicked Stepsister.” I call her that in my mind and behind her back. Her name is Marianne, an innocent sounding, old-fashioned name, suggestive of charity boxes delivered to the poor at Christmas and shelter for stray kittens. When she was head nurse at the hospital, I imagine her uniform came with a halo.

I hated her the first time I saw her: a blond toddler in my mother’s arms, lace on the hem of her white dress and edging on her white tights, a bridesmaid in miniature at their City Hall ceremony while I was at home, beating the old lady next door at Monopoly. *This is your new sister.*

I had known Him already, mostly by certain energy he brought into the house when he called for Mother— an energy I knew right away I had craved without knowing. If not for my own shyness and a certain reserve I sensed in him, I would have hung about his chair and offered to tell him about myself. I knew of her, too, his daughter in the care of an aunt in another city, waiting for Mother to take her dead mommy’s place. I could tell she was bad, through and through, this tiny bridesmaid. How else could she instill such hatred in my eight-year-old heart?

I could tell at once she was going to suck up all the attention. I stopped my ears against her crying, her endless chatter, and later, her angelic singing, and the echoing notes of her piano. In an attempt to satisfy their fantasy of two sisters living in harmony, our parents had our portrait taken together, she in pale blue ruffles, me in the red plaid I threw a tantrum to wear because it didn’t go with her dress. “Be nice to her,” Mother would say. “She looks up to you.” It was always about her.

We stand now, two aging ladies, on either side of his grave, in the hard rain that runs off the edge of her umbrella and splashes on the grass. No umbrella for me, both hands occupied, as they must be, with my walker. I imagine I look ghoulish, with my long raincoat with its hood sheltering my brow. It’s hatred that keeps me moving.

Time to leave him here, alongside Mother. W.S. slows to my pace and I realize she is now taller than I. The arthritis has shrunk and twisted me into what I am.

Rain drips from the pine trees and plasters oak leaves onto granite headstones. My father is buried here, somewhere. I think. I saw his picture, once, by accident. He was standing next to a convertible with its top down, his hand resting on the car door, as if he were about to open it and turned, arrested by the call of his name, to smile into the camera. Since I wasn’t supposed to find the photograph, I couldn’t ask if that had been the get-a-way car.

I could see, though, that I had his looks; handsome on a man, not so much on a woman. Swimmers shoulders, broad chest narrowing to a tight waist. I understood, then, why Mother’s

unguarded gaze, narrow and bitter, dissolved in confusion when I caught her eye. We circled one another, she and I, always careful. She was all I had and I must have been the sum total of her regrets. What had she done to make him leave? Why wasn't I good enough to make him stay? "Poor little motherless thing," people said of W.S., and I understood that no one deserved to be robbed of a parent by death. I imagined that in the eyes of the world, that was the difference between the two of us.

I notice how the rain glances off her black boots and splashes playfully on the pebbles of the walkway that winds through the old cemetery. At least my knurled feet are dry inside these old lady galoshes.

"Come back to the house," she says. "Stay as long as you like. In your old room."

In that room. I planned to leave that evening, but the day has taken its toll. "Thank you," I say. "I believe I will."

A fleeting expression crosses her face. Left over from those early days, it's a look that says, "At last, some attention from this big sister." I think I surprised her by coming back at all. Since Mother's death, she has kept in touch with cards at Christmas and my birthdays, keeping me abreast of family news, of his illness. She left her nursing job to care for him. Urgent letters followed, hinting at last opportunities to say goodbye, and finally, a desperate plea that he had asked for me. But I had no need of any last words from him. When the telegram came telling of his last breath, I booked my flight. Now, I allow her to dismiss my waiting taxi and help me into her car.

According to the fairy tales W.S. loved, Mother should have hated her, or at least neglected her. W.S. commented on this once, interrupting her bedtime story to pat Mother on the arm and say, "You're not mean like those other stepmothers." Showing a perception not often found in a four-year-old, or so I overheard Mother say to Him, later. How sweet and precocious. The subtext, of course, was, "Look what a good mother I am to your poor, orphaned child."

As for Him, he was mostly awkward around me, sensing, perhaps, that it was out of my too-deep need that I shadowed him. Like W. S. shadowed me. If he took me for ice cream, she came too, chattering and charming and boldly pretty. In snapshots, I'm always scowling, my bangs a dark slash across my forehead.

There's the house. The rain is finished, for now; the sky awash with color, lavender and pink and bruised looking clouds that promise another downpour in the night. She helps me from the car, unfolds the walker, then waits at the front door while I make my way up the flagstones.

Inside, she makes tea and I nap on the sofa, dimly aware when she spreads Mother's afghan over me. She was the obedient daughter, at least in their eyes. I saw what she was up to. Being good, so I would look bad. It was her fault I took up smoking. She drove me to break into the liquor cabinet. She never told on me. "Be careful," she used to whisper, but I knew it was her secret desire, my downfall.

Tomorrow, when they read the will, she will find that after my share, there is little left. She'll have this house, of course, but the bulk of her inheritance was long ago secured to me. Guilt is a beautiful incentive to generosity. It's a pity, really, that she'll never know the shame I spared her. I could have sent her father to jail.

“Stay,” she says again, pouring tea and passing buttered squares of toast. To an outsider, we could be two elderly ladies at the turn of the century, if not for her jeans and the fitted tee she changed into and her hair falling in blond waves. Her colorist must be very proud.

In the early years, he was always distant and polite, although he tried to do the correct thing. If he returned from a business trip with a doll for her, he would have a book or a record or necklace for me, presented with grave consideration, revealing always that he didn’t have a clue as to my taste in books or music and that he had failed to observe that I never wore jewelry. My mother was always pleased by these offerings, giving me looks that said, “Be more appreciative, would you? This kind man is giving you gifts you don’t deserve.”

Later, he did notice me. I sensed it in the way he looked away when I entered a room, his gaze sliding back, in tiny installments. My hair, my throat, my breasts. I began to see a way to become his favorite.

Tonight, we eat dinner on Mother’s good china and W.S. asks if I would like to have it, but I tell her I have no use for such things. Perhaps I will take the afghan. “Of course,” she says. The china is Spode. Probably antique. She could sell it to buy food. By the time she finds out how little money he had left, I will have left this cold, damp place for my dry home in the sun.

“I don’t know why you feel you must hurry off,” she says, a touch of the petulant little sister in her voice. “You’re welcome to stay here in your old room, as long as you like.”

My room. The swimming trophies are still there, behind glass. My high school scrapbooks piled on the closet shelf. The books he gave me lined up neatly, unread, on the bookshelf.

The pain is bad this evening. She has to help me to my bed. “Take two,” she says, eyeing my prescription on the night table. “It won’t hurt.”

I do it. After all, she is a nurse.

The narcotic works quickly, taking the pain, and with it, my will, no, my ability, to move. I don’t care. In the soft medicated haze, things come back to me. His muted step outside my bedroom door. The slight click of the doorknob turning, as he found, perhaps to his surprise, maybe even to his anguish, that it was never locked against him. The sinking of the mattress under his cautious weight. My name, spoken at last, his tender, urgent attention, my nightgown already hiked up, his weight. Sometimes, after, he would weep, and I would stroke his hair and tell him it was all right. And it was, for I was his favorite then.

Now, I feel his touch on my shoulder, more real than memory and I force open my eyes. It’s W.S., bending over me, her hair haloed in the lamplight. She’s holding a hypodermic needle, poised above my arm. Her voice is honey. I hear her words but I can’t seem to string them together to make sense. *“Last words...deathbed confessions...sting only for a moment.”*

THE END

Flesh

They want smooth bellies, most men.
No stretch marks.
No suggestion that another's touched
most deeply the core of sex.
Blue jeans should slide slow and low
on hips lithe as a snake.
A navel should be studded bright
as though no wrinkle can ever
appear, as though skin taut
with sweet bed's promise
can hold its shape with a prayer.
Most men look and look and look
and look away from real
life's curve: gift
a man with sense accepts,
celebrating
what rises to him,
soft and strong and singing lust
for all a full-lived body needs.

Camp for Girls



Thrill Ride

To the electric chair. That's where Bleitz pretends they go after he straps them in and slams the cage. "Did ya remember to kiss your mommy and daddy good bye?" he'll say. Or the old standby, "Hold on, a bolt's come loose." Hawk pulls the lever that sends them up. There's a sharp jerk, the grinding of gears and they're gone.

The line for the Sky Diver stretches past the ticket booth. Second to last night, everybody in Hicksville, or wherever they are this week, wants to take a thrill ride; make them forget their lives. Then it's back to earth— driving their air-conditioned tractors, shoveling pig shit, flipping burgers, whatever they do.

Bleitz motions a couple of Boy Scouts into the metal maw of the next empty car, cinches the safety belt so tight one of the tykes yells out, "Oww, you're hurting me." He leers at them, hopes his missing eye tooth strikes them like a current of electricity.

"Next!" Bleitz steadies another empty car to let two girls climb aboard. Load them up. Listen as their screams of fun turn to terror. These ones are still gangly, wearing shorts and striped tank tops. They smile as he lassoes their hips, gentle and slow the way girls their age like it. Yeah, Bleitz knows about cotton candy, all pink and soft and made of spun sugar, after the rides close down for the night and the tinkly music stops, and there are no more two-headed alligators or steers the size of houses.

"Next!" Stoners at nine o'clock. Guys in t-shirts and baggy jeans and scraggly soul patches. And the girlfriends who follow like sheep. They are in pairs. Two guys. Two girls. Strapped in and sent off into the night.

He senses the leftover girl on the ramp. A black wall of hate, negative ions swirling around in the night. Dark hair almost covering the hurt in her eyes. Her face is luminescent under the raucous orgy of flashing colored lights. She stands there, waiting for someone to ride with her to the end of the universe.

"You the oddball?" Bleitz asks, but gets no flicker of recognition, just blankness.

"You wanna ride with someone else?" he asks.

She shakes her head. Normally, Bleitz would get nasty and toss in some fat kid ready to barf up his corndog, just to keep things running at maximum capacity the way management likes. But he motions toward the waiting car. "Get in, then."

Bleitz is drawn to the screwed-up ones. But this one looks like more trouble than she'd be worth. He's careful with the safety strap, but his hand accidentally brushes her thigh and the look she gives him chills his bones.

When unloading time comes, Bleitz tells her cohorts, "Well if this isn't my lucky night. I found the hugest dime bag down there." Bleitz is so busy laughing at the one guy digging in his pocket that he doesn't notice the girl get off the ride. When he turns back around, her car's empty and swaying.

On his break, Bleitz wanders back by the trailers to where it's dark and he can think. His head pounds from the lights and tinny music, the screams, the laughter. The smell of one more corndog and he really might lose his mind. Not like in Texas, where he pretended to be just crazy enough to be invited to winter in the loony bin. All the pills he wanted and long talks with a head doctor, too.

Damn parents, moving away without telling him, leaving him with nowhere to hole up when the snow came.

It's been four years since he's heard from them. For all he knows, the old coots could be dead. More likely though, they're traveling around in their RV, trying to keep some distance between them and their life's disappointment. Maybe Bleitz will catch up with them. Some time when they're cleaning supper dishes and recharging the generator to watch TV, feeling safe in their sardine can on wheels, he'll show up at their door uninvited.

Late August and the breeze has the smell of autumn. And once again, Bleitz has nothing to show for summer but hangovers and spare change. Hawk had talked about Bleitz joining him in San Diego for the winter, but he hasn't mentioned it since early July.

Bleitz feels tired. So tired that he's actually thinking about turning into the people he despises, settling on a farm somewhere, with a woman, kids, a couple of dogs, maybe even a milk cow. Someplace where Snakeman, Rubber Band Man, and The World's Fattest, Most Disgusting Human Being will never find him.

Bleitz is within a hundred yards of the Sky Diver when he hears it— the sound of crying. Then he sees the girl, sitting on a milk crate smoking a cigarette. He finds it hard to believe the sound came from her. But there's no one else around.

“Hey, weren't you just on the Sky Diver?”

She eyes him warily and sniffs. “Might have.”

“Hey, where's your friends? The stoners.”

She stubs out her smoke and blows out the last drag. “Those idiots? I ditched them after the first ride.”

Bleitz reaches out into the darkness. He's not sure what part of her he's touching, but to his surprise, she doesn't pull back.

The midway lights are off and everyone has gone home when he takes her up into the sky for himself. Hawk's hand guides the lever as their car goes higher and higher. The wind feels good on his skin. Her hair lightly lashes his face. She might even be smiling. It's so dark he can't tell for sure. But as the ride speeds up and they tumble over and over, there's no mistaking her screams.

San Francisco

I was a prostitute in a brothel in the Mission District.
Curtains lined the windows, ornate and tentacled –
but I was also still a professor in New York.
My carpool went East –

a man came in
and I thought about telling him that I already quit;
it's my last day,
but I was afraid it would hurt his feelings.

He undressed and we talked about biking
across the TriBoro, or under 87
in the Bronx, because in the dream
these cities were the same.

Wearing white briefs, he lay down.

I touched him with my hand, spooning
him with my body, and when he came
it got in my hair, and on him.
He was angry but I didn't care
because it was over.

Of course, it wasn't really.
In the other room, a girl –
where had she come from? couldn't
she have taken him instead of me? –
asked how his massage was,
scheduled him an appointment
for next week. I remembered how
he came in wearing a bike helmet
and he lay down wearing a bike helmet
and I had to ask him to take it off.

Maybe I woke up after that, the appointment, scheduling,
or maybe I went to my other job.
I was annoyed she'd called it a massage,
annoyed at the whole oversized date book.

I woke next to Chris.
You knew, I said, and you were okay with it.
I didn't tell him that years ago I stayed in San Francisco
where the red-light district borders Chinatown.
I was a teenager, and alone.
From the hostel's windows, the steep city
lent herself to me; to my ideas of adventure
and who I thought I was.
I got drunk and lost one night, in the dark.
But my fear was so huge
it existed outside of me; so huge that by the time
I found my way back there was no place
anymore that could be home

My Relationship with Novél

He's always been the only man in my life, even if it took me a while to see that.

I met him five years ago, through friends-of-a-friend, and only saw each other a couple of times in high school. Almost immediately, I became intrigued with him; he was messy and rough around the edges. My friends supported our relationship because I was truly having fun and being carefree when I was with him. Sometimes I would even sit with my girlfriends during lunch and think about all the possibilities of him.

It was only a fling— no feelings attached means no feelings hurt once we parted ways, right? It was my idea to only have fun and not take our relationship too seriously.

Managing to make a bunch of mistakes, like never spending time with him or relying on him to meet me with dates or ideas, we ended badly. I was the one to end it. I had become so overwhelmed and then distant. At sixteen years old, it was always hard for me to commit to anything. Becoming obsessed with one— like the 'jock' or the 'drama geek— but then suddenly dropping that one to pick up another fling was the way I survived all my relationships. Never staying too long or regretting their departure from my life.

Though, this relationship hurt soon after I ended it. What was I looking for when I had... for him to fight back or give me a reason to stay? That was I'm always looking for a reason to stay. I can honestly say it hurt, when he had smiled at me softly and said, "I understand. You're young. You have all the time in the world to figure out what you want." I had wanted to yell at him and get him to fight for me. I was so immature back then, never understanding the consequences to my actions. I really did take him for granted.

He'd left town after that, seemingly fine to drop everything and move away. It was easier to forget about him when he wasn't around. Honestly, that was a lie I always told myself. I could never get my mind off of him. I liked to think about all the things he was doing, how he was doing, daydreaming different scenarios— even now, into my final years of college.

Suddenly over summer, he moves back into town. When I heard that he had, it was unbearable to keep away. The thoughts about him started to overflow that summer. It became harder and harder to concentrate on other flings without thinking about him.

Admittedly, I had matured somewhat since high school. I was tired of flings, and I wanted a committed relationship. I was looking for one now. Though being in college has taught me how much I hated relationships— the types that were all about examination, scrutiny, and truths. I wanted my self- expression, carefreeness, and uniqueness back. So why not give it a shot? To get the only one that kept running through the back of my mind all this time, the one that gave me all those feelings.

Actually, I was most likely out of my mind, going to him this early in the morning, but I had woken up with questions. Could we have worked out? Was there really no attachment to each other back then? I wanted to finish what I had started all those years with us.

He was uneasy to greet me, looking into my eyes with confusion, probably wondering why I was here. Maybe, I really didn't belong here... in his world.

He didn't say much. I guess I was going to have to do all the talking.

He guided me in, and gestured for me to sit down on the kitchen table. Immediately, he sits

down as well and crosses his arms across his chest, gazing down at me as I try to put my thoughts together. I had run over here with things to say. But now sitting in front of him, I was nervous.

“It’s been a while. Why are you here?” He asked so calmly. The deepness of his voice shocked me. He had grown, as well. It would’ve been stupid to think he hadn’t changed a bit in five years. Now he was more intimidating, more structured, more mature.

“I know it’s stupid, and I really shouldn’t have come here. I mean, it is selfish of me to have ended our relationship and now I’m here... but—” I felt the need to get up and flee. Fighting that urge, I planted myself firmly in the chair and steadied my shaking hands by crossing them on the tabletop. My heart thumped erratically in my chest. I kept my eyes off of him; it was too unnerving to look at him directly.

“I—I came here for a reason...” I start off, glancing around the room, avoiding any and all eye contact with him. He didn’t like that. He was always a straight forward person, so he asked me to look at him once more. Unsure of myself, I do. “I wanted to start over.” I said simply.

“No.” That one word was so deafening.

“Huh? But— why not?” I said, suddenly concerned. I hadn’t even been in this guy’s presence for more than two minutes and I was already being shut down.

“You can’t start over... I wouldn’t be who I am today if you didn’t leave me like that. Didn’t you learn in school that your first ‘draft’ will always be your shittiest?” He smirked when he asked that, but quickly composed himself. “I am willing to talk about this more. If you’re planning to start this again, and then walk away from it...Then, you can leave right now.”

“I have regretted not being with you so much,” I told him. “I don’t know where we will end up or how it might all end. I haven’t been able to keep you from my thoughts since I ended it.”

“That’s what I mean. What is our relationship, then?” He sighed, quite frustrated with me, before looking away, thinking for a moment.

“I used to be this spontaneous person, never looking before I jumped— that sort of thing. But I want to be different now because I’m older, so I can’t be that way anymore. I know I can’t. And you were my only true match that made me honestly happy.” He looked a bit taken back when I said that, but I only smiled at his reaction before continuing. “I just— I’m not very good with relationships. So, it might take me a while to work out the kinks, like all the details of our relationship. But I promise you that I’m not going to give you up so easily this time.”

He gave me a slight smile before looking away embarrassed. “I trust you.”

“Good! Okay— so we’re doing this right?” I asked him, slightly feeling more confident with myself. I could make this work. I knew I could make this relationship work this time.

“Yeah, I guess we are.” He looked me in the eyes. I sighed in relief, placing my hand on top of his.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“—Janelle, what are you doing? Why are you up so early?” My younger sister groggily asked me as she walked into the kitchen. I glanced up from my old torn notebook, which contains all my plot twists and character developments, long enough to glance at her. She positively looked tired with bed head and a twisted t-shirt from sleeping. My sister gave a questionable look at the fact that I was sitting at my kitchen table at six in the morning.

“You know that novel I started in high school? Well— I think I’m going to finish it now,” I said, confidently.

She raised an eyebrow at me, before nodding her head smiling. “You’re serious about it?”

“Yeah, I think I want to be an author, and I’ve got to start somewhere, right?”

“Well, good luck. You were always the one stuck in daydreams about your characters. I can’t wait to read it once you’re done,” She told me happily, but then yawned and turned around to grab two coffee mugs from the cupboard.

“I’m going to start making my outline since it’s fresh in my mind. Then I’ll write my third chapter,” I said, smiling. I stood up, taking one of the filled mugs from my sister. “Will you edit it after?” I asked her, hesitantly.

“Sure... but you’ve got to give me some cut of the profits if you e-book it.” My sister smiled. “I guess I’ll see you in a couple hours. You were always a quick writer.”

“Give it a few hours. I’m going to take my time,” I said.

“Okay, see you in a few.” She said as she walked back to her room.

Time Bans the Word “Feminist”

She says, “This position
gives us both
control,”

as I cup my fingertips
into the pockets
of her hips

and pull (a lotus bloom
burns tonight, but
that’s easy

to explain), and here,
just before love,
metal

in my hold, one hand
leaving her side
to grip

a fistful of hair, wrap it
like hot brass
knuckles,

arc the liquid steel
of her spine
with one

wet, slow kiss because
I am the hate
and I am

the “soulmate” and this
is what some
may call

balance: Her moan rising
to the slap
of skin.

Night Owl

Off I go again
down a continued path that leads me nowhere.
One straight line that doesn't curve for excitements gain.
The end never shows itself,
it just goes on and on and on.
The passenger companions come and go,
ever changing their names and their faces,
but they never amount to much,
even during their acclaimed reign.
Isolation is my truest friend among the minions.
Here in my dungeon, I attempt to make home,
dimming the lights to comforting measures,
turning down the bed to invite warmth,
keeping the clean under my thumb,
so I can feel complacent about the few square feet allotted to me in this prodigious world.
My tile floors are peacefully aseptic,
my mirrors are flawless against my reflection,
and the drying dishes glimmer with a pristine shine.
It heeds sanity when the daylight hours threaten to cripple me.
But it is night now, as it always is for me,
and I am passing the hours by playing with words,
because they always catch and conserve my attention.
I sit perched on my plastic chair,
before the iridescent screen,
sliding my fingertips across the letters,
unifying the fragments into tangible entities.
I fill the blank page with all the words that ail me daily,
and beg to escape from my dwelling.
In these late night hours before dawn,
when the world sleeps,
well, most the world anyway,
all except for me and the kindred ones alike,
us unrequited bar folk,
we keep the night alive with our rudimentary rebellion,
with our stools properly nestled beneath us,
and our pints rising to and fro the entrance of ingestion,
so that the happy juice can flow into our orifice,
digest into our blood,
mix the emotions,

and alter our minds until it resembles a happy time
The eternal night owls,
all seeking sheltered within ourselves.
But not every night can be of the liquid delights.
Most others, I resolve to be productive
at least until the idiot box starts courting me,
seducing me with a promise of mindless blabber.
Before long, I concede,
sinking into the cushioned feather coffin,
and begin flicking through the channels on the illuminated square box,
looking for an excuse to escape into some actors fake reality.
That too finds boredom fast,
and I quickly abandon the asinine folly.
Perhaps then I'll pick up a book and consume someone else's words,
setting myself inside their shoes,
living their predicament,
surviving with them their trials and triumphs,
feeling every revelation as they occur and come to terms with each new rising problem.
I wonder how I might somehow become narrator number one.
I find myself wandering aimlessly in a mental quandary of my own destiny,
or such that I am lacking.
And soon I am back to the root of my dilemma,
My fidgeting mind spins within its brawn enclosure.
This restless mental state mirrors these empty times.
Nothing much is ever shown for my futile endeavors.
These idle hands are strangling me from the inside out,
debris plagues my path.
I step lightly over and around the damaged parts,
but I never manage very far
The night is calling me under again.
So off I go once more,
in an attempt to better this stagnant limbo.
I pronounce foreign sounds and put them in phrases,
teaching myself the harsh verses of German stances,
reading and repeating,
writing out and remembering all the terms that collectively sound like a gargling whale,
but to a selected some, mean good morrow and fair well.
I broaden my horizons and extend my tongue to speak a new,
but still I fear etwas fehlt --- something is missing.

By mornings rise, I am bogged down by tedious hours that exaggerate every breath.
What next should I tackle and then set aside?
A revolving door of trivial upswings to endure the night.
I sleep the day away until the sun falls again,
and I am awoken by the shadows of the lonely night's plight.
And off I go again...

Word Born

Settle down, sweet child
Understand
There's a rule for every
chance that you take
a boundary erected
with each move that you make.

Stand as tall as you like
within the imaginary lines we create
it doesn't matter the place
it all has a name.

Write as you please
say what you like
just stay within the bounds
of our language.

But how else is a word born
without a thought
that leads to a notion
that impregnates a dream
we all have inside?

How else is a word born
than following your heart
and stepping out of the norm?

Two Weeks of the Terrible Threes

She still reminds me of the time,
at the age of three,
asking for milk
and I threw myself onto the bed
in a Scarlett O'Hara tantrum.
I can only imagine
my hand on my head
in "Woe is me" theatrics;
the cats and dog not the least bit
impressed by my performance,
nor sympathetic to my plight.
My child watching
with a front row seat,
wondering why milk
led to such drama. Maybe
she should have asked
for cheerios instead.
Even a banana
couldn't possibly cause
such maternal trauma.
Truth is,
I do not remember this misery—
at least according to my daughter.
I do remember
the cups of milk
spilled onto the floor;

her chubby little hands
holding each drink as a god
weighing the consequences,
the color of freedom,
like the parting of the white sea;
the plastic cup dancing
in mockery on the kitchen tile,
as she asked for another.
I remember
finally telling her *no*—
the new mom guilt,
thinking she'd shrivel up
from dehydration
and the milk gestapo would break down the
door,
ready to read me the riot act.
But we both survived.
She drinks her milk now
as a proper young lady should,
with a mustache of gratitude
and a belch of satisfaction.
And I haven't cried
over anything spilled since—
despite my tears.

The Other Side Unfiltered



Artist Biographies

Christina Abdou (page 20) is a senior at CSU Stanislaus, majoring in English. She plans to pursue a career in editing and is currently working on her first novel.

Joel Aquilar (pages 87, 108)

Angelique Limatoc Arnold (page 109, 163) has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. Her work has appeared in previous issues of *Penumbra*, as well as *Song of the San Joaquin*, and other literary publications on the West Coast. She is currently working on her first book of poetry.

James Berry (page 41) teaches guitar in Brooklyn, NY. His poetry, fiction, song lyrics, and photography have appeared in *The Walrus of Mills College*, *The Lincoln Underground*, and both the 2013 and 2014 issues of *Penumbra*. He's happy to be a contributor to this year's issue as well!

Alexia Brooks (page 28) graduated from CSU Stanislaus with a Masters in English in 2013. She currently teaches composition for the writing program at CSU Stanislaus. Alexia aspires to run one marathon a year until her body tells her to stop, and she hopes to write a memoir someday.

Bethany Burton (page 2, 3, 26) is a gal who loves writing incredibly personal free-verse poetry through which she hopes to evoke at least one emotion from the reader (even if it's disdain). At 23, love inspires her; the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Charles Laird Calia (page 36) is the author of two books: *The Unspeakable: A Novel* (Morrow) and *The Stargazing Year* (Penguin). His work has recently appeared in issues of *Cape Rock*, *Big Muddy* and *Earth's Daughter's*, among others.

Louie Crew Clay (page 64) is an emeritus professor at Rutgers. Editors have published 2,400 of his manuscripts. In Fall 2015, Seabury Press will release *Letters from Samaria: The Prose and Poetry of Louie Crew Clay*. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louie_Crew#Queer_Poet_and_Writer.

Tobi Cogswell (page 13) is a five-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee. Her seventh and latest chapbook is *The Coincidence of Castles* from Glass Lyre Press. Her collaborative full-length collection, *The Color of Forgiveness*, is available from Mojave River Press. She is the co-editor of *San Pedro River Review* (www.sprreview.com).

Douglas K Currier (page 58, 59) is a former college professor who was published in the past in a number of literary magazines and journals. His work appears in the anthology, *Onion River: Six Vermont Poets*. He lives in Burlington, Vermont.

Elaine Crauder (page 7) grew up in a village in Ohio and—though she's lived outside Philadelphia long enough to call Philly home—sometimes still waves at passing cars so as not to be considered rude. Her work is also in *The Boston Literary Magazine* and *The Eastern Iowa Review*.

Danyl Crites (page 60) is a junior at CSU Stanislaus majoring in English Literature and plans to pursue a career in publishing. She is both a writer and an artist.

Mitchell Duran (page 16) is a freelance writer living in San Francisco. His work has been seen in *RiverLit Magazine* and *Turks Head Review*.

Steven Damron (page 53, 117) was born 18 August 1995 in Salida, California and is a graduate of Modesto Junior College with an AA-T in English. He's written various poems and non-fiction short stories, many of which he's performed both in class and out.

Maryann Downing (page 80) has taught at New York University and co-authored *On Writing Qualitative Research* (Falmer Press). For many years she has written poetry, recently beginning to publish, with poems in *The Hudson View*, *Poetry.com*, *I-70 Review*, and now *Penumbra*. She works in poet Fran Quinn's monthly New York City workshops

Jesse R. Drake (page 70) is a pseudonym-loving 2013 graduate of California State University, Stanislaus' Master of Arts program in English Literature, and is currently enduring the joy of a life of quietly desperate obscurity punctuated by fears and fearless flights of fancy - and the occasional less-punctuated experimental work of words.

Jessica Dickman (page 39, 51, 110, 114, 118, 128, 135, 164) received her B.A. in English from CSU Stanislaus, and is a current graduate student in Rhetoric and Teaching Writing. Dickman, an avid yogi, currently molds young minds as a substitute teacher and crochets in her spare time. A 50 word biography is inadequate for her literary genius.

Alana DiLallo (page 139) is currently attending Modesto Junior College and working on getting her AA in English. She hopes to soon transfer to Stanislaus State to further her education in the English department. Alana hopes to one day become a professor at a local college and to continue to write, possibly even work on a memoir.

Alan Elyshevitz (page 85) is a poet and short story writer from East Norriton, PA. His collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund*, was published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press. In addition, he has published three poetry chapbooks, most recently *Imaginary Planet* (Cervena Barva Press).

Mariah Ezparza (page 25, 27) is an English Major at CSU Stanislaus. She enjoys reading and collecting books for her future library that will rival Belle's. She kind of maybe wants to be a writer of books but with that income can she afford books? Nonetheless, she still loves writing and wants to continue it for a while.

George Freek (page 98, 112) is a poet/playwright living in Belvidere, IL. His poetry has recently appeared in *The Able Muse*; *Off Course Literary Journal*; *Literature Today*; *The New Plains Review*; *The Stillwater Review*; *The Foliate Oak*; *Hamilton Stone Review*; *The Lake*; and *Samizdat Literary Journal*. His plays are published by Playscripts, Inc.; Lazy Bee Scripts; and Off The Wall Plays.

Kathie Giorgio's (page 132) novel, *Rise from the River*, will be released in April 2015 by Main Street Rag Publishing Company (www.mainstreetrag.com). She is also the author of the novels, *The Home for Wayward Clocks* and *Learning to Tell (A Life) Time*, and her story collection, *Enlarged Hearts*, also by Main Street Rag.

Fabián González González (page 88) was born in El Charco, Uriangato, GTO., México in 1987. He immigrated to Cloverdale, California in 1998. His poetry has been published in previous issues of *Penumbra* and *Río Grande Review*.

Gary Hanna (page 104) lives with his wife, the painter Anne Hanna, on an estuary off the ocean in southern Delaware. Last year he published two chapbooks: *The Homestead Poems* and *Sediment and Other Poems*, both from the Broadkill Press. He is the manager of the Writer's Library in Delaware.

Rose Hamilton-Gottlieb (page 146) has published 27 short stories and has completed three novels, a novella, and a short story collection. The *Chicago Tribune* published two of her stories as finalists in the 2011 and 2006 Nelson Algren Awards contests. She was a finalist for the 2014 Dana Awards and the 2011 Arthur Edelstein Prize for Short Fiction. A former college lecturer in History and American Studies, she currently teaches a class in fiction writing at the Fullerton Olli.

Ben Heins (page 158) is the author of two poetry chapbooks: *Cut Me Free* (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2014) and *Greatest Hits & B-Sides* (Vagabondage Press, 2012). He is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor of Writing at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. More info at www.benheins.com.

Ezra Ibare (page 71, 143) has attended CSU Stanislaus for three years and is a valuable member of the BFA program.

Mark Jackley's (page 45, 115) latest chapbook is *Appalachian Night*, available free from the author at chineseplums@gmail.com. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Natural Bridge*, *The Cape Rock*, *Fifth Wednesday*, *Sugar House Review*, and other journals.

Pearl Karrer (page 89), a former microbiologist, teaches piano, exhibits art in juried shows and is the Managing Editor of the *California Quarterly*. Her poems appear in many journals and anthologies; collections include: *Weathering* (Slapering Hol Press), *The Thorn Fence* and *Balanced Between Water and Sky* (Finishing Line Press).

Helen Kanevsky (page 136) is a Russian-born American poet. Helen is a vivid, lifelong reader. She was first published in *Penumbra* (CSU Stanislaus) in 2005. Her first book *The Devious Route* was published in 2012, her second book *Caged Time* in 2014. Helen still believes in the power of the written word.

Craig Kurtz (page 46, 48) resides at Twin Oaks Intentional Community where he writes poetry while simultaneously surviving the dream. Recent work appears in *Aerie Literary Journal*, *Conclave: A Journal of Character*, *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, *Danse Macabre*, *Red Fez* and *The Transnational*.

Gemma Keane (page 33, 40, 61, 81) is currently an undergraduate student at California State University Stanislaus. She is studying English Literature with a concentration in TESOL. Her main focus is to teach students how to get the most out of studying the English language. She enjoys blustery fall days, teaching, and scrapbooking all the photographs she takes.

Martin H. Levinson (page 1, 42) is a member of the Authors Guild, National Book Critics Circle, and the book review editor for *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*. He has published eight books and numerous articles. His poems have appeared in *The Potomac Review*, *BRICKRhetoric*, *Occupoetry*, *Specter Magazine*, *First Literary Review East*, *WestWard Quarterly*, *Poets and War*, *Boston Poetry Magazine*, *The Broken Plate*, *Third Wednesday*, and other literary journals.

Deborah LeFalle (page 14, 21) has always liked to write, but only recently has begun to submit her work for potential publication. Poetry and short, creative non-fiction are the genres she is drawn to most, with inspiration for her stories often stemming from personal experiences. She is a dedicated supporter of the literary, visual and performing arts; and in her spare time she enjoys spending time outdoors, gardening and communing with nature.

JB Mulligan (page 105) has had poems and stories in several hundred magazines over the past 35 years, has had two chapbooks published: *The Stations of the Cross* and *THIS WAY TO THE EGRESS*, and two e-books, *The City Of Now And Then*, and *A Book of Psalms*. He has appeared in several anthologies, including *Inside/Out: A Gathering of Poets*; *The Irreal Reader* (Cafe Irreal); and multiple volumes of *Reflections on a Blue Planet*.

Marsha Mathews's (page 145) book, *Hallelujah Voices*, presents the voices of an Appalachian church congregation as they experience pivotal moments on their life journeys. Marsha's love poems won the Red Berry Editions 2011 Chapbook Competition. Her first chapbook, *Northbound Single-Lane*, was released in 2010 by Finishing Line Press. Recently, Marsha was awarded the Orlando Prize sponsored by AROHO, for Flash Fiction.

Ryan McCune (page 62) was born and raised in LaVerne, California and graduated with his B.A. in Sociology at Azusa Pacific University. He has been a guest writer for his Alma Mater's newspaper *The Clause* with articles such as "10 Things Every Professor Should Know" and "Respond to Hate with Resounding Love."

Katharyn Howd Machan (page 149), Professor of Writing at Ithaca College, is the author of 32 published collections, and her poems have appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, and textbooks, including *The Bedford Introduction to Literature* and *Sound and Sense*. In 2012 she edited *Adrienne Rich: A Tribute Anthology* (Split Oak Press).

Jessica Moilanen (page 5, 84) is a senior at CSU Stanislaus where she majors in English. She works for the Patterson Unified School District and plans on returning as a high school English teacher in the fall. She enjoys writing, reading, and hiking in her spare time.

Kimberly Martinez (page 4) An occasional poet, with aspirations to travel and love in turn. Not quite sure about everything else just yet.

Margo McCall (page 151) is a graduate of the M.A. creative writing program at California State University Northridge. Her short stories have been featured in *Pacific Review*, *Heliotrope*, *In*tense*, *Wazee Journal*, *Sidewalks*, *Rockhurst Review*, *Sunspinner*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Writers' Tribe*, and other journals. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Herizons*, *Lifeboat: A Journal of Memoir*, *Pilgrimage* and a variety of newspapers and other publications. For more information, visit <http://www.margomccall.com>.

Anthony Maciel (page 6, 125) uses colored pencils in order to capture the unique shapes of each drawing to address the various story opportunities that each character can portray. He is interested in combining cultural and environmental references in each piece in order to invoke emotional responses within the viewers.

Raechel Murphy (page 78, 79) is a CSU Stanislaus alumni with a degree in English. She currently resides in the Pacific Northwest with her family. She is an aspiring writer that strives to find beauty and art in all things.

Sheryl Nelms (page 121) is from Marysville, Kansas. She graduated with a B.S. from South Dakota State University. She is the fiction/nonfiction editor of *The Pen Woman* and a three time Pushcart Prize nominee. See www.pw.org/directory/featured for more publishing history.

Clarke W. Owens (page 97, 111) has had poems published in many literary journals. His novel about climate change, *600ppm* will be published in 2015.

Noel Patton (page 150) is a senior at CSU Stan, the VP of the English Honorary Society, a published author of poetry, a lover of grammar, and a mom to a 9 year old daughter. After she graduates, she plans on going to UC Berkeley to complete their Editing Program.

William Portillo (page 90) writes stuff for fun. Randomly. He tries to write stories but usually fails to finish them.

Veronica Pulido (page 103) is a student at CSU Stanislaus, majoring in English. She's currently focused on finishing her degree, being a mother, and expressing her creativity via poetry, painting, and crafting.

Hayley Perry (page 31) is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English at CSU Stanislaus. She was voted shyest in middle school, which gave her enough angst to fuel her writing for at least ten more years. She enjoys reading Jane Austen novels, driving her 1970 VW Beetle, and helping with the youth at her church.

Anthony Perez (page 92, 138) is a poet, artist, and short story author. He recently graduated with a BA in English at CSU Stanislaus and is also pursuing a graduate degree there. When he isn't writing, he enjoys reading, listening to music, and movie trivia.

Brett Randich (page 50) was born in San Francisco, California, but he was raised in Manteca, California and Edinboro, Pennsylvania. His poetry has appeared in last year's *Penumbra*. Though he tends to be quiet in person, he has a lot to say when it comes to writing. He likes to write poems and aphorisms that are deep and thought-provoking.

Erin Redfern (page 66) writes and teaches in San Jose, California. Her poetry has appeared in *Zyzyyva* and *Red Wheelbarrow*.

Craig Rondinone (page 37) has written two books --- *Ten Tales to Make Your Head Explode* (short story collection) and *Jeepers* (children's book) and has had short stories and poems published in *Clever*, *Mobius*, *The Timber Creek Review*, *Writers' Bloc*, *Cantaraville*, *Oracle*, *Watching Time*, *The Broken Plate*, *MUSE*, *Snail Mail Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Riverrun*, *The Rose and Thorn Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Cooweescoowee* and *The Pink Chameleon*. Craig also won the second-place prize in Dream Quest One's 2011 "Dare to Dream" contest and has a poem scheduled to be published in the 2014 edition of *SF Peace and Nature*.

Cristina Sandoval (page 49, 52, 116, 126) is a student at Modesto Junior College where she is studying English. She aims to study in the California Bay Area, and eventually teach in Korea. Music and writing are her passion.

Carl Scharwath's (page 69) work appears internationally with over fifty published poems and seven short stories. He recently won the National Poetry Contest award on behalf of Writers One Flight Up. His first poetry book *Journey to Become Forgotten* was published by Kind of a Hurricane Press. His art photography was featured in the *Conclave Journal* and *Edgar Allen Poet*.

Natalie Schemmel (page 91) is an art major in her junior year at Stanislaus State. She recently transferred from Modesto Junior College, where she obtained an Associate's Degree in art. Natalie's concentration is in painting, where she uses narrative imagery to express often-times jocular commentary on themes such as feminism and sexuality.

Jordan Severns (page 32, 122) is an English major who also really hates writing about himself, even if it's just a brief biography. He'd much rather talk about you. You look lovely today.

Alexandra Silva (page 34, 93) is a sophomore level student at CSU Stanislaus who is currently majoring in both English and Theater Arts. His entry poems are a creative result of some unexpected, yet not wholly unwelcome inspiration.

Raven Sisco (page 92, 119) feels fortunate to have been published in literary journals across America, as well as in Australia after six years of intensive study in poetics. She has also received a number of awards, including two Senator James Phelan Awards for Metrical Verse, a Virginia de Araujo Award for Poetry, and one from the National League of American Pen Women.

Laurence Snyder (page 76, 77, 86) is a poet, musician and retired teacher. His work has appeared in many magazines and anthologies and has been performed in NYC and Baltimore.

John Surowiecki (page 56) is the author of four poetry books and six chapbooks. He is the winner of the Washington Prize, the White Pine Prize, the Poetry Foundation Pegasus Award for Dramatic Poetry and Nimrod's Pablo Neruda Award, among others. His work has been published in *The Southern Review*, *Poetry*, *Rhino*, *Mississippi Review*, *Carolina Review*, *West Branch* and other journals.

Cristal Tadeo (page 35, 129) is a CSU Stanislaus student, is a mixed subject artist and practices photography, painting, and is known for her hand-made installation work that takes on the playful visitation of death and childhood nightmares. Presently, Cristal uses her free time volunteering at the Carnegie Arts Center in Turlock and is illustrating and writing a short story book due to be finished at the end of this year.

Mark Taksa's (page 144) poems are appearing in *The Texas Review*, *Cape Rock*, and *Big Muddy*. He is the author of ten chapbooks. *The Invention of Love* (March Street Press), *Love Among The Antiquarians* (Pudding House), *The Torah At The End Of The Train* (Poetica Magazine) are the most recent.

Kelly Thomas (page 68, 95, 159, 161)

Vincent J. Tomeo (page 99, 100)

Janelle Triplett (page 155) is an English major and Speech Communications minor at CSU, Stanislaus. She enjoys writing short stories and novels in her spare time.

Richard Vetere (page 12 page 43), new novel *The Writers Afterlife* was just published by Three Rooms Press. He is also the author of three books of poetry including *The Other Colors in a Snow Storm*, *Memories of Human Hands* and *A Dream of Angels*. His other novels include *The Third Miracle* (Simon & Schuster) and *Baorque* (Bordegerhia Press). He was made a Lifetime Member of the Writers Guild of America, East in 2010 and has twenty plays published by Dramatic Publishing and has written four feature films released by Sony. His movie *Vigilante* is now considered a cult classic. He is now directing his new screenplay *The Hipster Zombie Apocalypse*. He has a master's from Columbia University and lives in NYC. Vetrich88@aol.com

Monica Wendel (page 153) is the author of *No Apocalypse*, which was selected by Bob Hicok as the winner of the 2012 *Georgetown Review* poetry manuscript prize and published by the press in 2013. She is also the author of two chapbooks, *Call it a Window* (Midwest Writing Center, 2012) and *Pioneer* (Thrush Press, 2014).

James Weaver (page 72, 74, 75) is a high school English teacher who guides his students to recognize the importance of reading, writing, and revision. He is also a poet who tries to capture moments to share with others and remind him of where he once was. He has been fortunate enough to have been published in the 2012 edition of *Penumbra* and have performed at the revival of Slam on Rye. He would like to dedicate "Hospital Visit" to his mom who has shown him the beauty of life.

Mat Wenzel (page 57, 65) is an MFA student at Ashland University. He currently teaches high school English at DaVinci Academy of Science and Art in Ogden, Utah. He currently has fifteen stamps on his National Parks Passport.

Ken White (page 17, 22, 82, 101) recently retired from the worlds of advertising, corporate communications, and interactive entertainment to concentrate on writing and community service. Born in Lathrop and raised in Modesto, Ken enjoys telling stories about the Central Valley heartland.

Richard Widerkehr (page 120) won two Hopwood first prizes for poetry at the University of Michigan and received his M.A. from Columbia University, which he attended on a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. Two book-length collections of his poems were published in 2011: *The Way Home* (Plain View Press) and *Her Story of Fire* (Egress Studio Press). Tarragon Books published his novel, *Sedimental Journey*, about a geologist. Recent work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Rattle*, *Floating Bridge Review*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *Nomad's Choir Poetry Review*, and *Clay Bird Review*.

John Sibley Williams (page 130) is the author of eight collections, most recently *Controlled Hallucinations* (FutureCycle Press, 2013). Four-time Pushcart nominee, he is the winner of the HEART Poetry Award and has been a finalist for the Rumi, Best of the Net, and The Pinch Poetry Prizes. John serves as editor of *The Inflectionist Review* and Board Member of the Friends of William Stafford. A few previous publishing credits include: *American Literary Review*, *Third Coast*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Inkwell*, *Cider Press Review*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Cream City Review*, *RHINO*, and various anthologies. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

REED MAGAZINE

WRITING CONTESTS

TURN YOUR MANUSCRIPT INTO

MONEY

THE EDWIN MARKHAM PRIZE

AWARDED FOR POETRY \$1000

THE JOHN STEINBECK AWARD

FICTION UP TO 5000 WORDS \$1000

THE GABRIELE RICO

CREATIVE NONFICTION CHALLENGE

NONFICTION UP TO 5000 WORDS \$1333

VISIT WWW.REEDMAG.ORG TO SUBMIT

The Law Office of



Kelly Finley Nebiolini

KFNLaw helps clients with overwhelming consumer debt and family law issues.

615 B 13th St. Suite #1

Modesto, CA 95354

Visit www.kfnlaw.com or Call 209-260-1255



CATHY DeBOER - BROKER/AGENT

LIC. # 0770062

CATHY DeBOER *Insurance Agency*

Since 1989

- AUTO • HOME • BUSINESS
- LIFE • MEDICAL • RETIREMENT

Affinity Discounts for Teachers and Professors

QUOTES BY PHONE

577-8252

145 Woodrow Ave., Ste. B-2
(Off North McHenry • Modesto)