



# HAWAII

# REVIEW

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# Hawai'i Review

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## Hawai'i Review

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2008 Patsy Sumie Saiki Award Winner

*Chelsey Kojima*

## Grass Islands

Grass doesn't burn your feet.

She learned that after thirteen years of walking barefoot. Even though Mama made her makeshift slippers out of cardboard and scraps of fabric, Mariko liked going *hadashi* like the rest of her friends. The makeshift slippers made her *look* like she couldn't afford slippers, so somehow Mama's slippers always wound up broken or missing. If she could, she would have built an entire sidewalk of expensive grass; the soft, springy kind that grew in Mrs. Coleman's yard. On heavy summer days, she remembered how she used to run on the burning 'Aina Haina pavement, the heat like sticky fire on the soles of her feet, running and running until she reached the next grass island. The dry grass and rough dirt were a haven to her burnt feet, a momentary break until the next stretch of hot concrete. But even the fire of the pavement was better than makeshift slippers.

When Mama finally bought her first pair of real slippers from Mo'ili'ili Store on her thirteenth birthday, she didn't have to look for grass islands anymore. She remembered that day marking when no one at school could say, "What, you no can afford even real kine slippahs?" She hadn't been born when Pearl Harbor was bombed, but Mama still tucked away coins in an old mayonnaise jar, kept extra cans of Spam when she could, and never splurged on anything unnecessary. Real slippers were one of the things Mama considered a non-necessity, at least until Mariko became a teenager.

When she asked Mariko if she wanted to buy slippers for her birthday, Mama was smiling the special smile she only used on occasions when she didn't have to try to be happy. That day, she and Mama walked under a sun so hot it bleached the sky white-blue. The pavement burned her naked feet but she didn't dare walk on the grass. Mama didn't like her trampling other people's grass.

From outside, Mo'ili'ili Store looked both invitingly shady and dusty. In the dust, Mariko could see the imprint of her feet like a mark that said Mariko was no longer the one who "no can afford real

kine slippahs.” She followed Mama to the bin of slippers with her head turned back, watching with fascination the path she’d made in the dust. She felt this path stretching between a life of needing grass islands to one of cement walkways. It was cement—not grass—that rubber slippers were made to walk on.

“Mariko-chan, what color do you want? Pick one.” Mama smiled at Mariko and sorted through the bin of slippers.

Mariko planted both feet in front of the bin, noticing that her feet were dark brown with dirt. Rubbing one foot against the other, she peered into the bin and picked up a pair of slippers. They were bright red with three thin indented lines running along the straps. She placed the slippers on the ground and slipped her feet in them. She had trouble getting the straps between the correct toes and the size was too big for her, but Mariko smiled.

Mama looked down and smiled, too. “I don’t know about the color, but nice, *ne?*” Mama sorted through the slippers as she continued, “and let’s find you another, mo’ better size.”

Mama finally pulled out a blue pair and gently set it on the ground by Mariko’s feet. Mariko slipped them on. They fit perfectly.

Mama sighed, smiled, then nodded. She looked at Mariko. “What do you think?”

Mariko smiled back and nodded her head emphatically at Mama. That’s when she heard the whispers.

“Look how dirty she makin’ dose slippahs! I no can believe dey even wen let her *touch* anytin’.”

“They no more class. I no can buy slippahs from this store.”

“For real. The daughter jus as dirty as da Mada.”

“Let’s go, Yasuko, we dunno what else they wen touch.”

Mariko slowly turned and two Japanese women about the same age as Mama stared back at her. Mariko swallowed and inched her feet out of the slippers, then looked at Mama.

Mama’s lips edged into a smile that Mariko knew well, the composed one that made Mama look both elegant and dangerous. She looked both women in the eye.

“*Konnichi wa* Yasuko-san, Harumi-san. Long time no see, *ne?*”

The one Mama called Harumi stuck her nose in the air.

“Whatchu doin’ here, Aiko? I never knew you could afford this kine stuff.”

Mama's lips stretched into a bigger smile. She continued as if she were having a conversation with the two women, "My daughter and I are buying slippers for her birthday. She's thirteen already."

Mariko felt both women's gazes drop to her filthy, slipper-less feet.

Harumi wrinkled her nose. She sneered, "You guys should go Goodwill, this kine store not meant—"

Yasuko interrupted, "Why you even boda talkin' to dem, Harumi? No sense. You know dat she—" Yasuko nodded towards Mama "—is bad luck. Everyone knows dat her real fada was one *haole* and her mada's boss, too." Yasuko snickered, "You even talk to your *real* fada Aiko?"

Harumi sneered and added, "Anyone born between the legs of one whore is bad luck. And now her kids gonna be bad luck, too." Mama's voice echoed in the store as her speech broke from its careful English, "The only one here who goin' get *bachi* is you."

Mama picked up the slippers and walked gracefully to the cash register. The word "whore" was still heavy in the air, but Mariko could not imagine her frail soft-spoken grandmother as a whore. Mariko felt instinctively protective of Mama. She jutted her chin in the air and went to stand beside Mama.

The man behind the register had been looking a long time at Mama. He sighed and said, "Two dollars."

Mariko gasped.

Without hesitation, Mama handed him the money.

As they walked out of the store, Mama's homemade *zori* wiped out the path Mariko had made with her bare feet.

Three years later, she could still taste the excitement of owning her first pair of slippers while her friends were still barefoot. Yet, she also remembered the shadows shifting behind Mama's eyes despite her calm steps that marked the path home. Mama seemed even more consumed about appearances after that day, scolding Chiemi if her hair was messy and Mariko if she came home with dirty feet. Mama had always worn her hair back and away from her face, but she began coiling her shiny brown-black hair into a tight bun every day so that she almost never had a strand of hair out of place. Mama never mentioned the incident again, so Mariko did not dare to bring it up.

Mariko stopped at the grass island in front of Mrs. Coleman's house. Mrs. Colman's grass was unlike the rest of 'Aina Haina's grass islands: its rich green blades were velvety and fresh and contrasted sharply against the dry brown-green needles of her neighbors. Mrs. Coleman, her math teacher at school, had married a rich *haole* from the mainland. Mama said that's how she could afford to water her grass so much. Mariko took off her slippers and closed her eyes against the soft coolness pressing against her feet. This was *real* grass.

Like the concrete that had once burned her feet, there was something else burning inside of her today. A burning that made her want to run from grass island to grass island like she had done as a child, even though she was in plain sight of everyone. This feeling had brought her back to the memory of buying her first slippers, although she was not quite sure why. Mariko thought of Mama again and felt a tension in her stomach.

He had ignited the burning.

Mariko liked to go behind Kalani High School's music building after school if she didn't have to work at Shito-san's dress shop. She had always savored this place as her own, a place where she was truly alone. But today as she approached her usual spot under a shady Koa tree, someone was there.

He had silky, soft hair that spilled over the corners of his eyes to rest lightly on his cheekbones. His hand moved fluidly over what looked like a notebook on his propped up knee, but Mariko couldn't tell if he was writing or drawing. She took a half-step towards him as if to discern what he was doing, and then stopped as a breeze gently lifted his hair so that it rippled in waves of dark gold. The way it moved and danced in the wind reminded her of long blades of grass. Mariko felt an aching in her chest that seemed to affect her breathing. Then before she could think of what to do next, he turned and smiled at her.

Even from a distance, she saw that one corner of his cheek was imprinted by a dimple. She had wanted to reach over to touch that dimple, deepen it and leave her fingerprint there. Heat rippled through her cheeks and neck, staining them pink. The sounds of traffic on Kalaniana'ole Highway dissolved as her breathing quickened. She smiled back at him.



Mariko felt the shadows of that smile on her lips even now. It had been Allan and Dennis who finally surprised her, coming suddenly from another side of the building. Allan's eyes flicked from her to the dimpled boy, then back to her. Dennis's eyes narrowed and he muttered something that sounded like "slut" under his breath to Allan. Mariko had managed a crooked smile before turning around and running.

Mariko kicked at a loose rock and shook her head. She shouldn't have run. If she had just said "hi" to Allan, he might not have even realized she had been staring at a boy whose dimpled smile gave her chicken skin. He might have interpreted the heat on her cheeks as sunburn. He might not say anything to Mama.

Mariko rounded the bend of Hind Iuka Street with a wrinkle forming between her eyebrows and her heart thudding unevenly in her chest. She could just make out the branches of the crooked coconut tree of their front yard. Kenji once told her their tree was special because its soul stretched out to wave at people as they passed by.

Mariko paused long enough to check the mailbox. She spotted a small envelope with Kenji's neat and meticulous English handwriting and the few words he carefully sketched in Japanese *hiragana*. His letters didn't come as frequently as they used to. Her eyes flicked towards the house and when she was sure no one was watching, she tore open the envelope.

October 4, 1960

Dear Mama,

*Hisashiburi. genki?* I hope this letter finds you well. I am beginning to understand why you haven't written. I've been coming to the wharf when I can, and I have to keep telling myself that this is the same ocean I crossed seven months ago. The ocean is different here in October, the wind blows up gray-blue waves that smell like salt and the old copper cans *otōsan* keeps in his tool shed—it's the closest I get to home. I remember what you told me before I left. Is that the last thing you meant to say to me? Is this why you haven't written? I've grown accustomed to saying "I don't know" when people ask me questions about the past. I still have more questions than answers, Mama, but I'm getting used to this. Even my questions are changing. I think that's a sign that I'm learning, changing. I am.

The Golden Gate Bridge is just how grandma described it . . . not golden but deep red, stretching above the clouds. Todd and I drove up this hill in Berkeley because we heard you could see the top of the bridge from there. It was strange, seeing only the posts of the bridge floating in a sea of white-gray clouds. I hope to go back to that hill in the spring or summer when the weather clears up. Even though I haven't seen a sunny day yet, Mama, the lights along the streets are bright enough to fill whole skies with light. One day, I hope you can see it, too.

Write soon,  
Kenji

Mariko tucked Kenji's letter in her backpack and ran across the browning patches of grass in her yard. She pictured Kenji in the thick bustle of a crowded street, the air around him heavy with the aroma of street vendors cooking *yakitori*, simmering clams and crabs in chowder, opening jars of pickled fruits and vegetables like the ones at the Mānoa Crackseed store. The streets would be livelier and brighter than the Japanese lanterns at the Obon Festival.

"Mariko? What are you doing out there? Come inside."

Mariko almost lost her balance stepping over the wall and had to grasp the staircase railing, its handle rusted from years of marinating in the ocean-sprayed air. The screen door creaked open and Mama stuck her head out. Mariko could smell onions.

"*Hayaku*," Mama said, but Mariko was already walking up the stairs and into the house. "Did you have work today?"

"Yes," Mariko lied, "for a little while."

Mama's eyes paused a moment too long on the curling, tangled mess of Mariko's hair. But all she said was, "I need your help with the chicken *hekka*. Can you make the *satojoyu* for me and cut the *won bok*?"

Mariko tiredly nodded. She set down her books in her room, washed her hands, and started mixing shoyu and sugar together for the *satojoyu*.

Tonight, she wished she had at least asked Chiemi how to wear

lipstick. Mariko's eyes slid across to Chiemi whose rhythmic breathing told her she was already sleeping. Even as Chiemi slept, she looked fresh and beautiful. Mariko knew that when her sister woke up, her limbs would be animated with that ever-ready smile, that graceful extension of wrists and fingertips, and that gentle swaying of her hips as she walked down Hind Iuka Street to school. Mama said Chiemi had "hula grace" in her motions, even though Chiemi had never danced hula.

With familiar pangs of jealousy at her sister's natural beauty, Mariko scanned her reflection in the mirror. Her thoughts lingered on the afternoon. His smile still burned the air and she knew she would go back there tomorrow. Even though she hadn't seen him up-close, his smile had seeped into her as if she had inhaled him. If she was closer, she might have reached out to touch his lopsided dimple, the dimple that marked where his smile began but not where it ended so that his smile seemed to stretch on forever.

Mariko pursed her lips together tentatively in a kiss, narrowed her eyes until her eyelids doubled, and looked seductively at the mirror. She scowled. Exasperated, Mariko scotch-taped the fold of skin right above her eyelashes. Even though the scotch tape left her eyelids sticky, she was training her eyelids to double, to make her eyes look larger and more doe-like. She had trained her eyes so well that a wrinkle was starting to form above her eyelashes. Mariko blinked and her eyelids flattened. She used a paperclip to press the fold of skin back into place.

Trying not to blink, Mariko opened her math book and tried to focus on the page in front of her. She sighed, closed her book. She tiptoed to the living room where she could hear her father's rhythmic snores from the hallway. Misori Hibari's voice strained out from their old record player, "*kawa no nagareno . . .*"

She made her way outside where a warm breeze blew down from the mountains lining 'Aina Haina. Mariko crept to the back left corner of the house's foundation where the space between the house and ground hid rain-stained letters from Kenji. She bound the latest letter to the pile with a rubber-band and, spanning the small collection with her fingertips, picked up a postcard with the words "San Francisco" in bold red letters. She recalled thinking how strange her

brother had been to mail a blank postcard, as if the postcard had been too nice to write on. Wrapped around the postcard was a thin letter. His rushed handwriting read:

June 23, 1960

Dear Mama,

Do you know where our family is from? Today we ate in a place called Japantown or “Nihonmachi” as the people here call it. We sat next to a bunch of Japanese from San Francisco. Everyone started talking about what their families lost in the war: the lands and belongings they lost in America and the relatives in Japan. Mostly, they talked about Hiroshima. Then Nagasaki. They asked me if I had lost anyone in the war, too? Did we lose any relatives Mama? What prefecture of Japan are we from? Did our family live near Hiroshima or Nagasaki?

This was the first time I have *felt* Japanese. There is a hollowness in me. I feel as if I am losing something all over again. You are so strong, Mama, so strong. As a man of twenty, I am still lost. They don't know who I am back home, but neither do they know who I am here. I'm going to start all over again, Mama. I look forward to your reply. Do not work too hard, get rest, and eat a lot. Tell Papa I will make him proud . . . I will make something of myself here.

Kenji

Mariko looked up at the stars. Was Kenji looking up at this same sky right now? Mariko shook her head and bundled the unanswered questions along with the rest of Kenji's letters back in their hiding place.

As she stood to go back inside, she didn't see the letter slip out and fall in the fern patch. Mariko was looking at the stars and her thoughts wandered back to the boy. Mariko knew that somewhere on the island, he was underneath the same sky, perhaps smiling with that dimpled smile stretching on and on.

The next day, the sun was just sinking below the horizon as Mariko made her way home. As the crooked coconut tree came into

driveway and into the house. She pulled Mariko into her bedroom. Mariko blinked in the sudden darkness. Dust glittered in a shaft of sunlight that broke through Mama's shutters. Mariko could count the amount of times she'd been in the room on one hand.

Mama tip-toed to retrieve a large Liberty House box from the top of her closet. She set the box on the bed and carefully lifted the lid. Curious, Mariko peered over Mama's shoulder but didn't step closer. She could see layers of newspapers Mama lifted from the top, and then thick bunches of tissue paper that were parted to reveal what looked like fabric. Mama slowly lifted the fabric from the box. Even in the dim light, Mariko could see gold cranes flying across the black silk of the *kimono*.

Mama longingly gazed at the *kimono* as she said, "This was your grandmother's—my mother's—*kimono*." She looked at Mariko. "Grandma came to Hawai'i as a picture-bride."

Mama's hand gently spanned the width of the *mon*, the symbolic crest of her family, until her palm covered the hand-stitched fabric. "I'm not sure whether your grandma brought this *kimono* with her or whether your grandpa gave it to her." Mama released the *mon* from under her palm just long enough to brush an invisible mote of dust from the neckline. She murmured, "But it's the closest thing I have to a family *mon*."

Mariko almost lifted her hand to touch the *mon*, but didn't. Finally Mariko asked, her own voice cracking in the silence, "you didn't ask grandma about the *mon*?"

Mama smiled softly to herself, "No."

Mariko persisted, "What about grandpa?"

Mama sighed and was silent for a long time. "He died before I was born. But grandma always said he had kind eyes that crinkled at the corners like *origami* paper folded and creased too many times."

Mariko held her breath as she waited for Mama to continue. She suddenly couldn't stand the silences anymore, the pile of unasked questions clinging to the *kimono* over the generations like dust, the unspoken answers.

Mama traced the flight of the golden cranes with her fingertips. "Grandma endured so much so I would have a better life, Mariko, wearing this *kimono* and serving *ocha* at rich houses and restaurants, wherever."

Mama's hands gently folded the *kimono* back in the box. "Your family has worked so hard to bring you here." She put the tissues and newspapers back in their place.

As Mama placed the Liberty House box carefully back in the closet, Mariko wondered if grandpa, behind wrinkled eyes creased too many times, had blue eyes.

Mama dusted her hands. "I'll ask Sunada-san if Allan can walk you home tomorrow."

Mariko was late. Mama would be furious if she was late today.

Mariko quickly scribbled her name at the top of her paper. As she placed her paper on Mrs. Coleman's desk, she paused long enough to admire two perfectly folded golden cranes that were on her desk. Each fold had been carefully measured so that the inner white space of the origami paper didn't show. It took precision and care to make cranes so perfect.

Her head snapped up at the sound of footsteps. Allan sauntered into the room, a cruel smile pulling at a corner of his lips. Dennis was right behind Allan, his smile crueler, as he whispered something in Allan's ear. She felt a drumming in her chest.

"If you're looking for Mrs. Coleman, she went to a faculty meeting but should be back soon," Mariko said as she gathered her things.

Allan's usually level and carefully modulated voice trembled as he said, "I was actually looking for you." Mariko spared a side glance at him. "I – I was actually looking for you yesterday," Allan tried to smile as Dennis snickered.

"I know you go behind the music building sometimes, so Dennis and I went there. And you were looking at *him*." Allan's smile deepened into malice and he bared his teeth. "You embarrass me. You know what kind of family you come from? I've always looked past that because your *otōsan* is such a good man. But this is what I get in return? I deserve *more*, Mariko."

Dennis added, "you fuckin' bet you do." He pushed Allan's shoulder and smiled.

Mariko blinked and opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"You—you—" Allan's hand curled into a fist. He swallowed hard before the words flew out, "He's a nobody! So what if his dad got my

of pain and trying not to breathe. Mariko found that if she didn't flex her muscles or bend her body, the pain didn't come. One more step to go. Mariko could hear Mama in the kitchen.

A face appeared behind the screen door. "Whatchu doing Mariko? Wanna play Daniel Boone?"

Mariko gripped the railing so hard her nails cut into her skin. She managed a weak smile as she lifted herself onto the final step. "Later," she sucked in air as an invisible knife sliced the insides under her stomach. "Later, Kameji-chan," she tried to smile as he pushed open the screen door for her.

"What's wrong?" The skin on Kameji's forehead squeezed together as he frowned. He looked so much like *otōsan*.

"Nothing, Kameji-chan." She squeezed his shoulder. The familiar softness of his t-shirt over his small shoulder made her throat ache suddenly. She pushed Kameji and his questioning eyes towards his bedroom. He looked at her one more time before obeying.

In the kitchen, Mama was sliding a bundt cake onto a round dish. It landed smoothly in a perfect "O." If she knew Mariko was there, she didn't acknowledge her. Instead, she spun the plate in a full circle as if checking the cake to make sure it was flawless. Everything in the kitchen was the same: the long stems of green onions in a jar of water, the red and blue family of stick figures Kameji had drawn still pinned to the refrigerator, and two gardenias from the yard Mama had picked yesterday.

"I'm making this for Sunada-san," Mama finally broke the silence without looking at Mariko. "To apologize to her."

Mariko swallowed but couldn't get her throat to work. A bitter taste edged into her mouth at the sound of Sunada-san's name.

"I heard you didn't meet Allan today, Mariko." Mama dripped sugar-frosting in an even glaze on the cake. "So if you weren't with Allan and you weren't at home, where were you?" The glaze dripped slowly down the sides of the cake.

Mariko's own tears bled down her cheeks. She finally managed to breathe, "Mama."

The frosting was already making a web-like pattern across the cake. Mama sighed and shook her head. "And I found this—" Mama's elbow gestured towards Kenji's letter "—in the yard today."

Mama finally looked up. "I don't even know you anymore."

A sob tore from Mariko's chest. She couldn't stop the tears, her gasping sobs. Pain wracked through her and made her teeth feel numb. Mama didn't know her anymore. The truth was Mariko didn't know herself either. She was a stranger; the onions, Kameji's picture, the gardenias were all in the same place and yet, they were no longer the same. They were no longer simple.

The sudden fragility of these items, their ability to be crushed so easily pushed the words through Mariko's throat. "You've never known me, Mama." Her voice was deep with the inflections of her emotions.

Mama set the frosting down calmly, then looked at her daughter. She looked calm except her eyes had changed, darkened into a deeper brown with hints of hazel.

Mama's silence suddenly maddened her more than anything else. She took a step towards Mama, and then she had closed the space between them until she was close enough to reach out and touch Mama. She didn't.

"Say something, Mama!" Mariko held back the impulse to shake Mama's arm. "Say that I'm wrong, say that you don't know me, say you're a whore's daughter, say anything Mama!"

Mama's jaw slumped open and her eyes widened. She stood away in denial.

Mariko couldn't stand the look of disbelief and disgust in Mama's eyes, not today, or the way Mama's hands hovered carefully by the bundt cake as if to protect it. Suddenly, Mariko was tearing into the bundt cake, clawing with her fingers. She heard Kameji run into the kitchen, but Mariko could only think of destroying the cake until there was nothing left for Allan to take. In the space of seconds, all that was left on the plate were streaks of white frosting and brown crumbs. Around her, the kitchen was littered with the remains of what had once been Mama's perfect cake.

Mariko could smell the burning kerosene now as she walked slowly to the backyard. A part of her thought *Kenji's letters*, but the other part of her didn't want to know, didn't want to ever know. But her feet methodically plodded up the path until she saw the raging fire in



the *hichirin*. Her grandmother had used the *hichirin* to cook rice, but there was no rice in there today.

Mama had her back to Mariko and she was throwing unruly stacks of paper in the fire. Mariko could only stand there and blink at the spectacle.

Then she saw the color on the papers. Glossy colors. Mariko's jaw dropped open and she swayed closer to the fire.

"Mama?" Mariko's voice was a grating whisper.

Mama continued to dump Mariko's photos into the fire.

"Mama!" Mariko ran to Mama and spun Mama to face her.

There were dried tears on Mama's cheeks and more tears forming in her eyes.

"You..." Mama's bottom lip trembled. "You are not my daughter."

She shook Mariko's grasp from her shoulders and walked briskly away. Mariko felt strangely numb as she watched the broken figure of Mama. Her gaze traveled back to the roaring mass in front of her so she didn't see Mama pause and turn around.

Tears spilled over Mama's eyes as she gazed at her daughter. Mama's breath hitched; she thought she saw what looked like the bloody outline of teeth on Mariko's ear. She took a step towards Mariko, paused, and then rushed in the other direction towards the house. The gloss on the pictures bubbled in the heat and the paper edges curled in as they burned. She could no longer decipher what memories those pictures held, what pieces of her were burning. Mariko felt strangely numb and the tears she should have cried pulled back deeper behind her eyes.

Mariko stumbled to her hiding place behind the wild ferns. She paused for a moment as she clutched the letters from Kenji, trance-like. They held answers that Mama would never have from Kenji. Mariko held them over the fire, already feeling her own silence set in. She wanted to hurt Mama with silence. Mama would never find out why Kenji had left or that he wrote at all. Mama would never know why Mariko had hid the letters. Mama would never know Mariko.

Mariko blinked and shivered, cold despite the heat from the fire. She stepped back and clutched Kenji's letters to her chest. She wouldn't be another Mama.

The darkness of night was thick despite the bone-white moon in the sky.

Mariko shifted the heavy backpack of clothes on her shoulder and felt Kenji's bundle of letters press against the small of her back. She stopped and looked back towards home. She could just make out the leaves of their crooked coconut tree. Were there coconut trees in San Francisco? Mariko thought she saw the crooked coconut tree wave at her. She cut the darkness with her hand as she waved back. The tears that had been waiting behind her eyes finally spilled over her cheeks as she turned to walk in the opposite direction. As she took a step, she felt the ground give in slightly and realized she was walking on a grass island. Brushing tears aside, she took off her slippers and gingerly set her bare feet on the ground.

She felt the grass under her feet, so cool and damp and real.

Mariko dug her feet in as deep as she could until the damp earth showed between her toes, anchoring herself to the ground like she used to do when she was a child eating raw *saimin* in the playground with Chiemi and Kenji. She hadn't needed grass as soft as Mrs. Coleman's grass back then. Mariko spiraled through time, remembering a day when she had dug her feet into the earth like this and gotten a poki stuck in her middle toe. She had been crying, clutching her foot and staring at the thorn-like poki through tears. She tried to get it out but it just pricked her fingers some more, and soon Mariko was sobbing because she figured she would never get it out; it would be stuck in her toe forever. It was Kenji who knelt beside her and pulled the poki out of her dirty toe even though he probably got poked in the process. He ruffled her hair and said, "See, it wasn't that bad. All better now." Mariko thought of how some words dried with time and others grew stronger because of it.

Suddenly, Mariko was running so hard towards home, her feet kicked up bits of grass and dirt. She sailed past the crooked coconut tree and into the house. *Otōsan* was snoring in his armchair with the voice of Misora Hibari dipping into his dreams. Mariko walked directly to Mama's bedroom.

In the moonlight, Mariko saw that Mama was clutching Mariko's baby picture. The floor creaked softly under Mariko's bare feet.

"Mariko?" Mama's hoarse whisper broke through the night.

Mariko hesitated before going to lie down next to Mama. She curled her body against Mama and reached over to touch Mama's

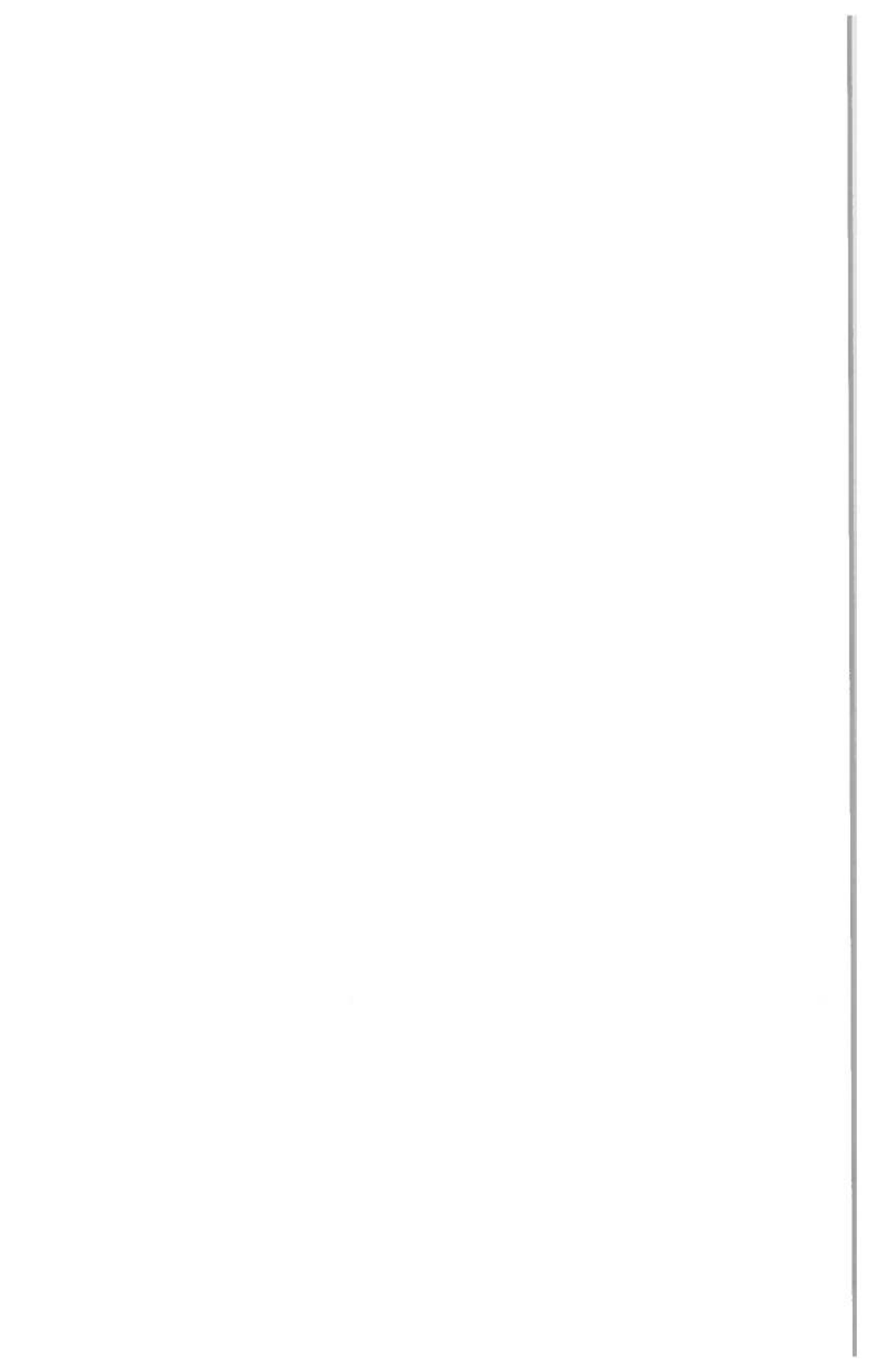
arm. After a moment, Mariko felt Mama's hand enveloping her own.

Mama squeezed Mariko's hand. After a long silence, she whispered, "Once, when I tried to ask my *okāsan* about my father, she told me the past did not matter. What mattered was '*kodomo no tame.*'"

Mariko swallowed, "*Kodomo no tame?*"

She felt Mama nod. Mariko thought she saw tears in Mama's eyes. "The sacrifices that must be made for your children."

Mariko listened as *otōsan's* record stopped playing and the wind outside knocked the branches of the crooked coconut tree together. When everything was still and sleep clung to the edges of Mariko's eyes, she heard Mama add, "Tomorrow, let's go buy you shoes."



## I. BODY PARTS

### a. Crude at the Beach: Grand and El Porto

**Gut:** 1 August 1992. Sixteen. Dear sky and passing cotton clouds,  
I sift sand through pale hands and think, Refine me. Make me a lady. Desirable to men. A happily-ever-after man. Dad said of my older sis: "She doesn't have a man and she doesn't have any savings put away for the future." Man would refine my crude self. Refine crude self to get man. Change me. Refine. Not marketable as I am. Not useful. Refineries turn crude oil into a useful product. I see oil tankers on the horizon--two of them.

**Upturned Palm:** Dear grain of sand, Eighteen today. 1 August, 1994. Mom had a dream last night that I died. Arguing with a random vagrant in Downtown L.A. I backed into the boulevard where atomization by bus occurred. Thanks for letting me know, Mom. In the dream she called me Helena. Grain of sand, you are stuck in a lump of tar. You cling to my heel like a metastasized cancer. I walk you home with me.

**XX chromosome:** Dear driftwood, Thanksgiving, 2007. Grandma hairsprayed her do in preparation for the ER. My mother takes after her. One hour before my arrival into this world, she showered at home, pausing to grope white tiles.

**Eyes:** Dear concrete bathroom stall w/ no door, Thirty today. Walking here saw some puppies trotting alongside the road. Plump potatoes rolling along get along lil' doggies plump potatoes rocking down the rollicking roadway and they were headed--I saw where they were headed. Mama Mama on the side of the road. Knocked out. One eye bleeding, nose wet with red and the puppies went straight for the tits, straight for life, the milk, that honey still dripping from the dying body. Keeps on giving. The fawn coat. Full color. Auburn sunset.

**Clit:** 14 July 1994. Dear night-flying seagulls, the stars that dimple the sky. I wrote today:

"Sensual lions. Clumsy monkeys. At 13 sex was silent, awake under sheets, behind doors, in porcelain tubs. Now I want to scream into the nightdaylight muddy dirt absorbing my heels, absorbing my toes--leaves shivering on Einstein trees, glowing in phosphorescence." Dad's at the beach-side processing plant tonight. A shut-down. Might last three days. I walked here to be close. Alcohol breath always comes with the end of a shut-down.

**Clit:** 15 June 2000. Dear night seagulls, please don't shit on me. I wrote today:

"Feral full moon again. Sometimes I fight the transformation.

Tired of masturbation. LayLie still, Fight to Kill the tremors, the lengthening teeth, the watering eyes. I lick the salt off my skin, swallow, and look into darkness." Oil tanker on the horizon lit by the moon looks lonely. Think of the people on it. The ship shifts in the sea, the air sticking salt to their skin--the same air sticks to me.

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watched today as she put away her silver dancing shoes and said, "Life just doesn't go as you expect. I always thought I'd be surrounded by a big family with lots of laughter and music and grandchildren and a big house. Two of my three children are dead. I have three grandkids. None are married, yet. I may not live to see any children out of them." I hesitate to tell her about the fact that once upon a time, I was pregnant. Her mother's name was Kunegunda--straight from Poland. She died of cerebral hemorrhage. My mother and I are kindly reminded of this. But my Grandmother is tough. She stopped her own father from beating Kunegunda, and at seventy-two, she crawled out of a rolled vehicle and walked home. "Hospitals are where you get sick," she'd said.

**Tongue:** Easter Break 1982. Dear metal rabbit ears, Hiding behind your television box, I silver-spoon brown crystal sweetness onto my pink tongue, push it to the roof of my mouth, (roof of my mouth?) ceiling of my mouth-- As I hear Vanna spelling out destinies. Then I hear my mother yelling for me to get dressed for dinner.

**Bacteria:** Spring Break 2001. Dear front-door with blue peeling paint. This is what you heard my mother say to me: "Oh your poor face. Those look like they hurt." I responded with a smirk and wave of my hand, so she would let me enter the old house.

**Skin:** Dear bathroom mirror, 1992. Sixteen today. I found a position for my bare ass on the counter and pressed my face against you. Chin, cheek, nose, forehead. Eyes. Like messing with

Janna Plant  
a loose tooth, the inquiry satisfies and pains  
me--a simultaneous moment. The pores of my skin  
show evidence of my atmosphere. Dirt, dust,oil.  
The grit can't lie. Industry abounds. I'm  
changing.

**Appendix:** 27 January 1991. Dear beaten-up door  
frame, Mom hugged me today and looked into my  
eyes. Commented that someday my true love would  
look down into my eyes in just that same manner.  
Was there something about a wedding kiss?  
Superbowl Sunday today. One channel has the  
halftime light show with flying skirts and legs.  
Another channel has firecracker streamers  
shooting through a dark enemy sky. I don't see  
legs flying. That's all I know about the War.

**Skin and Cartilage Tendons:** 25 December 1994.  
Oh Christmas tree, A man to love. A manatee to  
love. Either one, anything but a bellyache and a  
box of chocolates. Christmas is for what? I  
forget. I stuck the turkey knife in the hollow  
belly. The bones hugged together by bits of skin  
and cartilage tendons. I photographed the  
gutted carcass as it sat in metal on the  
turquoise counter, held Mom in the background of  
the frame. Her strained (divorce impending)  
smile killing my lens. I miss you so much, Mom.  
Dad, I miss you, too. I've kinda missed you since  
the day we met. Oh sweet bellyache.

**Tear ducts:** 1 Jan 1995. Dear sage carpet and  
dog hairs,  
Told Mom and Dad I'm moving out. Glad that's  
over. Dad couldn't stop taking those deep  
breaths--like he was watching hell rise before  
him. Mom was reserved. Her paper heart



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it. My sis called today. My mom. My grandma. Everything is fine and I am happy and with someone that cares about me and we have a cute, little studio by the beach and I am an adult. A fire blazed at the refinery today. I never like that. I heard an explosion. Dad never calls me.

**Diaphragm:** Dear paper bag, 16 May 1995. Thanks for giving me my breath back that first day. Things getting better a little. Not so much craziness. We might move to Arizona and give that a whirl.

**Nervous System:** Dear golden interior lighting of neighborhood houses, 26 Aug 1996. The temperature chills me. Your atoms look warm, warm glow. See a table set with candles. Place settings. Warm inside you, isn't it? I lean against the bathroom window screen to see what I can see. The screen's dust tickles a sneeze out of me. "Are you getting sick?" the bathroom door asks. In ninth grade, I wanted to get raped so I could have my very own shrink. In tenth grade, I got the shrink without the rape. Wonderful shrink assured me I had plenty to work through.

### iii. Hillcrest

**Sphincter:** 15 December 1994 Shrink: "He told you about the prostate experience?"

Me: "Oh, yeah. We're all scatological and shit."

**Nose:** 21 Oct 1992 Dear walls of my shrink's house, what have you heard today?

Janna Plant

"I got to see dead bodies! There were like ten of them. All laid out on tables. It was so cool. Before I walked into the room, I thought I might gross out--the smell was strong--you know they're all preserved and stuff. And their faces were covered, of course. But, Wow! It was so cool to see how big everything is inside of our bodies. All the nerve cords and stuff. And the organs and there were male ones and I saw that one of the corpse's penis--its penis, the full unit had been sectioned into two and the balls, too. So, you could see the inside.

"A lot of the kids around me were just being stupid, you know? I wanted to see stuff and they were all milling around trying to take the bags off the heads. And cracking jokes about pubic hair and fucking dead chicks. This made the teachers and staff have to watch them instead of do a hands-on deal of the cadaver situation.

"One of the bodies must have been in an accident or something because one of the legs was raised up like it was bracing against an impact or something."

**Neck:** 1 May 1993. the disconnect

Shrink: "Draw a self portrait for me.

"Where's the rest of your body?"

Me: "I don't know.

"I don't draw. I figured it would be easier to just do my face. I guess artistic merit isn't what counts here."

Shrink: "You may want to consider why you identify with your head

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only. And notice that there is no dimension to the self you've drawn."

Me: "I can't draw."

Shrink: "Regardless of that--"

Me: "OK. Got it. I'll tell you that story next time--by then I'll have made up a good one to explain that."

Dear walls of shrink's house, repeat after me, not the shrink, iv. Mariposa

#### iv. Mariposa

Spine: 1997. Dear black guinea pig in a cage with cedar chips to shit on, My grandmother wrote me a letter today. "Hope you find a really nice boy who will take real good care of you and provide and be real nice to you."

**Hollow heart:** 2001. Dear door number one,  
"Okay. So. Well--what does this guy look like? Does he have a good smile?  
"What are his eyes like? Does he have good eyes?  
"How 'bout his teeth? Big teeth? Little teeth?  
"Small lips? Big lips?  
"What's his nose like?  
"How 'bout his eyebrows?  
"Does he have Scorcese's or like too metro or anything?  
"What about the body hair situation?  
"So, does he have a nice voice?  
"Good stride when he walks?  
"Right on. That means he's got some weight in his pants.

Janna Plant  
“How does he dress? Pretty good?  
“No Teva’s, right?!”

**Senses Five:** 2001. Dear Surreality, I am with the contestant from behind door number one. I am a spectator. These towers were the town center, America’s center, our temple to capitalism, our shrine. Workers inside, unaware of how structures, specifically the one they were in, will collapse at the mercy of compounded opposition.

“You didn’t hear about that?” The mechanic asked my boyfriend.

Boyfriend: “No. Well, I don’t own a television. So, we just woke up and focused on getting the car down here.”

Car parts surround me. Whole dead cars like dinosaurs decaying in the morning light. My senses roamed as the mechanic and my boyfriend droned on. A curved VW bug shell was propped on top of another, and carpenter bees flew in and out of the structure, on their way to something.

The sweet smell of oil permeated the air and fresh dew alighted upon cracked fenders, bent runners, blown headlamps.

Inside the shop, black dust powdered 3 inch-thick how-to manuals. Worn coveralls reposed on a ripped leather chair, guts busting out white against the common filth. The single speaker radio spoke in bites, the reception spotty: “...two planes...,” “...hijacked...,” “...trade center...,” “...burning...,” “...thud is sound...,” “...people...,” “...ground.”

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We left the car, walked to a pancake house. He got a three stack. and spoke to the elderly couple next to us.

My knife raked into the layers of charred cow muscle, my fork skewered it, my teeth ground it. My belly's growl satiated. I communicated with hands and eyebrows as my mouth was already engaged with the steak.

*The Weekly* was open before me and I used a greasy hand to quietly lift a page in order to glimpse my horoscope.

"What does it say?--Worth reading? Boyfriend.

"No, no.--The usual bubble gum," I demurred, surprised by the attention.

Me, later: "Nothing was on the Internet about it?"

"Well... I think I did I guess see a picture on Yahoo, but I just thought it was one of those new movie ads, you know? It was in the same place they usually are."

**Hands:** Dear door number one. 2004 November. I'm cracking this unit.

He: "I love you."

"Hold that thought." That's what I said.

Puncturing the throat first. My hands transform scissors to a knife. Force it in and drag it down down through layers. Release buckwheat hull blood. Scissor knife the gut to the pelvis. Eviscerating a stuffed horse--Who knew how liberating? Maple. The mildew-soaked stench of her body, the fabric skin. Brown hulls pour from the gut.

Janna Plant

To cancel the eyes, hands push scissor blades into the neck, cut incisions from collar to eye. Each eye bleeding buckwheat.

An empty sack of skin collapses before me. My two hands, cracked palms up, cradle the dead thing: cream and tan pinstriped cotton, white yarn tail and mane, memories leak from the body.

“I love you.”

“Hold that thought.” That’s what I said. Next to go has to be the cat, Pearly. Blue eyes. White fluff. My chipped fingernails push the fabric fur open around the eyes--two blue moons exploding. I push up the chin, dive the scissors in. I can’t hold these memories. I tug the scissors down, poly-fill white belly blooms open. Scissors to the chin. Slice to the eyes--one. One. Split the cat nose in two. Empty the body’s sack.

With the dead fabric swinging from my clenched hands, I walk bare feet down wooden steps. Blue toenails step onto green paint chipped by the weather. Blue toenails into green grass, not a pasture but a garden. Basil, rosemary, tomatoes plump and dangling invitation. I kneel and set the dead horse and kitty into a grave of fertile soil. I push worn fingers into the soil, shove a handful over the deceased, swirl a mix into the dead, and bring the dead back to the soil.

Too many stuffed animals. A pair of Teva’s.

**Upturned Palm:** 2005 January. Door number two. Dear potential lover who owns a pair of cowboy boots and wears them: “What if this is all we ever do? Just smell each other for the rest of

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At 4pm, I dialed you and said your children would be ready to see you in the morning. I twined torches to the bed posts and lit the fuse to the citronella, so that the mosquitoes would stay on the outside of my light. I hugged the bed, clawed its pillows. Walked circles around it.

Night fell and I began to pant. Sweat cleansed every pore. I coughed up the water that I had just gulped down. My body was taking me places I'd never been before. I trusted it to take me there. I thought of the two inside me, how their worlds were rumbling, shifting. How their bodies, like mine, were arranging them into the posture for this ritual.

Sweat singed into the crack on my lip. I called out their names, begging my body and the sky, the grass, and the sea to bring them safely.

At midnight I was delirious, roaring. The moon blinked above me, glancing through the clouds. I got on all fours and the quakes were coming quicker now.

My vision was more than vision. My entire being breathed with the world. I noticed stains starting on the sheets, marking memories. A breeze tickled through--raised the blond hairs on my arm. A torn leaf, a fallen petal, the basil in the herb garden, my cat snoozing on the limb of the tangerine tree, the sweat dripping from my swollen breasts.

Mosquitoes whispered outside the circle. Lilo bolted down from her perch, scattered a crunching pile of leaves, transformed into The Huntress. The squeaking mouse by the mango tree was soon to be lost.

Ainsley's head was there--I could touch

Janna Plant

it. I bucked against the metal at the foot of the bed and inhaled and I serpent-hissed and bucked again and serpent-hissed her right out into the world. Cord and blood and relief and I've got one more coming. I bucked and hissed again, my face contorting to match Ainsley's screaming mug. She's got all limbs and digits. Darwin soon.

Darwin was head head head head head head ear neck shoulder arm flailing, whole beef-cake body gush gush gush and almost lost him off the end of the bed. Cord, blood, relief, he's got it all, breath. Breathe. Oh, these two wriggly animals, the apex.

The Apex.

A moment of quiet before the sun screams through the clouds, burns new day into my eyes, dries the night from the sheets, and warms my naked family.

Lilu is beneath the bed, shaded from the sun, licking the hunt from her fur. The mango tree extends its shadow to protect my babies from the harsh light.

Sleep consumes our exhausted selves. I smile, dream I have a cub in each arm.

I awake feeling the power of Gaia, and as Ainsley and Darwin latch onto my aching breasts, I see your car turn from the road onto the long driveway.

My cheeks flush, look like two apples dangling above a wide smile. My eyes glow to receive you.



You fumble: "I'm late. I ran out of gas. You're outside!"

I'm still smiling, and I do not answer. Your emotion has begun to press tears from your wondrous eyes."

**Hormones:** 1 September 2006 Dear bullshit happily-ever-after fantasy, Let's be real here and err on the side of clarity. Once upon a time, there was a boy. And there was a girl. One day, when the girl walked out of her English class, the boy was waiting for her. He took her heart. Actually, it was given to him with a violent passion. The girl's violence made the boy hesitate. He tried to give her her heart back, but it got stuck in the space between them. She wouldn't take it back all the way. And he became comforted and tormented to still have it in his reach. The girl was devastated on all accounts. The boy was devastated on some.

He didn't know what to do. So, he met other girls. He fucked a few. He told the original girl to go out, find someone better. This original girl was still lingering in the breathing space between them. The boy got a girlfriend. Told the original girl that this gotten girlfriend wasn't really a girlfriend, then moaned about this quasi-girlfriend for the rest of his life, as she became his wife.

### c. On the Road to Refinement

**Neuralgia:** 2005 December: Dear dermatologist says, “What do you use to stop the itch?”  
“Urine. It’s a Girl Scout thing.”

**Amygdala:** 2007 17 March. Dear silent co-worker to whom I am blabbing: “Almost got myself killed in London once, you know. Twenty-first birthday. The whole crossing the street business. Typical American. Totally jetlagged, and pissy, too. Wanting to hurry up and get back to the hotel and sleep and I start the cross and I look left and right and there you have it, the car. Which didn’t slow. Mom and her new-to-me boyfriend behind me GASP. About to kill myself right in front of her. I mean, it’s one thing to kill myself, but entirely another to do it right in front of her. After she’s worked so hard pushing me out of her womb and trying to keep me alive and happy and cultured all these years, and then I just go and walk myself into moving vehicle. Really nice. That’d just be plain selfish of me I think, to be so careless.”

**Left Brain:** 2007 14 February. Dear Juicy Couture language advisors, A girl’s anus & cheeks covered by terry cloth. Emblazoned, “Juicy.” Wrong location. To pull off the thesis, put “Juicy” in the front, over the clit, then that’s lit. Sometimes, Dad laughs so hard that snot comes out of his nose. Retirement next year, he says.

**Mind:** 26 September 2007. Dear Iraq clusterfuck: Watching “No End in Sight.” Vortex of destruction. Sitting in the theater next to you, feeling like a useless American. I want to do important work. Want to help people be human. The most I can do tonight is sit and watch a movie screen explain how my good

country has been driven insane. I work hard to  
orgasm later.

I work hard to be a simple animal.

Hypothalamus: Dear distant cowboy, 3 May 2007.  
I want your freckles  
to fuse to my freckles forever--donotletgo.

How do I teach myself that the brunette next to you  
at the bar is just  
particles of me, and me of her,  
and you of us  
and us of you, and the  
bartender---

**Waist:** the disconnect. 5 November 1998.  
Standing on the bus in a snug lace camisole with  
men's slacks on my lower half.  
"Hey there, cute duckie. What is it with you? Just  
BJ's?" I look away from the speaking man. His  
eyes shift and bore into my skin. An ad about what  
Chevron does for the blue butterflies in the area  
cannot get this man's eyes out of my skin. I point  
to a pair of abandoned dentures, white and pink on  
a brown seat. This works. Convulsions of laughter  
cause dandruff to fall from black spiky hair as he  
writhes in joy.

**Shoulder:** 30 November 2004. Dear stabled grey  
horse, My grandmother lamented her life, and the  
lack of family and children and laughter and music.  
"It's all very quiet," she said. She apologized about  
not being present for any of my Bobby Sox games or  
my volleyball games.

**Shoulder:** 1 December 2004. Dear stabled grey

Janna Plant

horse, My mother today confronted me about why I left Door #1. "He was so good for you, so supportive. I never saw you smile so much. You never smiled like that in your whole life." Smiling ain't all its cracked up to be. You want him, Mom, you can have him. Horses don't have to smile to show that they are happy.

**Pitted Pores:** Dear bottle of Brevoxyl, November 2007. Thought I'd wake up one day and suddenly feel like a woman and that would be it. Eyes closed. Eyes open. No pain. Ha---

"Ha," my grandmother adds after most sentences.

**Ear drum:** 20 Mar 2003 Dear Reformer, I heard that you said the following about me: "She used to be so much more patient. She's almost hostile now." My sister reminded you that I have my own life, my own concerns. That didn't suffice. Operation Iraqi Freedom starts today. I just read this line: "Children are always episodes in someone else's narrative." This worries me. You try to fix me for your own narrative, don't you?

**Clit (I really love it):** 29 August 2007. Dear fiery mare that just learned how to trust me. Stop snorting at me. This is just a piece of paper with a poem on it. I've cracked and distilled something. Will you listen?

"Root my nose in the mud, the  
grain  
the fertile soil my cloven hooves  
sink sink sink cleansing mud  
soak into my pores

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The docs say, "All systems go."

No problems. Great health. I sit in silent space with her. We look at one another and smile. I can't find words. My mom has a palpitating heart that explodes words. Her words bullet the nurse and the doctor and admissions clerk, shoot across the bed, dust my grandmother. I sit in silent space breathing this dust with her. I can't find words. The air between my grandmother and me seems to glow. I stop searching for words. A weird urgency animates my hand. I reach into my purse, grab a small photo from a recent date, and show my grandma. She chirps to life and gets us all laughing. A consolation prize.

*Chad Faries*

Some Verse from Cacti in the Wind

See the way we penetrate the hollows of air  
like a deep stare or a reunion.

My palm is turned in as I wave goodbye  
wiping the hollows between my hand and face.

Forever now the birds chirp not unlike  
a sequence of condensation that has bled  
from early dark morning.

Somebody's sight is polarized,  
a cloud mistaken for a pillow.

Mother now, tell me again about the hats  
and the camera and your back against the inside  
of the garage door, a hand like a full field  
of grass over your body, laying into it. It smells  
like a motorcycle, that patched jacket.

It smells as if chirps have become bouquets  
of a new hybrid and rain looks at it all  
sweetly despite its lack of presence.  
Oh, this is all a poke while driving  
down the highway with some old photos  
and hunger. This is all something the sun said  
this morning when it burnt a hole through the horizon.

And the smell, shouldered on a stiff back of wind,  
was discernible from here and there.

*Lauren Lawrence*

FATHER, YOU ARE SOMEWHERE

Sometimes a body part, a finger in the afternoon  
Pokes at the ingenious living  
Of your disappearance;  
The overcast sky carries now and then  
The blue gray of your eyes.  
This is no false inventory—  
There are perimeters of vision  
Beyond the ash storm wrested from your body.  
You must be somewhere.  
It is nonsense you are nowhere  
In all this terrestrial room.

*Lauren Lawrence*

SAHARA MOMENT

I remember the blaze  
Of your skin  
After the dawn soaked in,  
The sand-frayed edge of your lash.  
You were traceless even then  
Like the indefinable men that swept the dunes  
With the broom of their bodies  
And left nothing  
For the directionless birds.  
There were no roads in the desert.  
Just the distance I had to go through  
To recover from  
Where I was.



*Lauren Lawrence*

FOR THE DUCKS IN THE CENTRAL PARK BOAT BASIN

The ducks in their frock-tailed coats  
Are jackbooting the view.  
Their wakes are pulling a singular cord,  
This way, that way.  
Water quickens from the peddling.  
The kick impulse strafes the entire pond  
With ripples.

The leader is rounding an endless path  
Of contrition.  
He is always in front of himself  
So no one knows better than him there is nothing more here  
That remains to be seen  
In this pond.

I know what it feels to be tied  
To your own reflection.

*Maura Gage Cavell*

**Kind Offerings: An Ode**

Casual, confident,  
comfortable within himself,  
he laughs and smiles so warmly—  
a summer's glow in winter's cold.  
Fisherman, he is always tan  
from those prized expeditions,  
his blue eyes more intense  
because of his golden skin.  
When one is in trouble  
he is a calm friend.  
Anyone who knows him  
is the better for it.  
He lives life with a deep  
joy and love—whether hunting  
or gardening. Mostly,  
he loves his child.

*Tyler McMahon*

## Driving Our Disaster

The airline lost everything except our surfboards and tuxedos. As it turned out, that was all we could fit inside of our tiny rental car anyway. On the way back from our first session of the trip, at a beach called San Andres, my brother and I argued over what the 'R' stood for on our gas gauge.

"It must mean full. What rental car doesn't come with a full tank of gas?" Rob was optimistic.

"But it's on the left hand side."

"Maybe that's the way they do things in whatever country this car was made. Maybe it's the metric system."

This was our first full day on the island. We drove along a well-kept, white-sand beach on the outskirts of the capital city. I watched for the naked breasts I'd heard Rob speak of so often. It was the only beach I'd seen in Tenerife that wasn't black.

"They imported it," my brother explained. "The Spanish government brought the sand over in boats from Africa so that Santa Cruz could have a beach. They built that big breakwater to keep it from washing away." The line of black boulders stretched out to sea. Sunbathers laid their towels on a few of them.

"No waves then, huh?"

"No waves. But it's a fun beach. It's a popular place for kids to go have sex while they still live with their parents."

It was chilly in the passenger seat with my still-wet board-shorts. I felt light-headed and my stomach growled. My dinner had only been half a sandwich. We'd borrowed two tuxedos for the trip, one which was too skinny for either of us and another which was too fat. It was decided early on that my brother would eat half of all my meals right up until the wedding.

"That's the church where Maria's wedding will be." Rob pointed to a tall stone cathedral. "The reception is in one of those yacht-club places we passed a minute ago."

The *autopista* rounded a curve and I looked down on a complex of concrete swimming pools right along the shore—blue amorphous

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shapes, landscaped with black volcanic rocks and tropical flowers.

"They're filled with seawater," Rob said, "those pools. They trap it at high tide. They're the shapes of the seven Canary Islands."

"Why?"

"For the tourists. It's popular along these rocky stretches of coast." My brother enjoyed playing the guide. He hadn't been here in over five years, not since his study-abroad. But he'd never stopped talking or thinking about the place. I hadn't seen him this happy since before the incident at the parking garage.

"Dude, I think the needle's getting closer to the R."

"We're just going up a hill."

Our car had a chrome lion—a little silver silhouette—on the grill as a logo. There was a large clock where the speedometer should have been. When my brother turned on the headlights, the engine revved and strained. Exposed bolts poked out of the dashboard and upholstery. We argued for a few more minutes about the significance of the R, then we ran out of gas.

\* \* \*

We'd been forced to go on vacation. My brother had wanted me to see this island since he studied here years ago. His old friend Maria was about to get married. Tenerife was the obvious choice. It happened on one of those clear spring days that I loved in Northern California. We were busting rod for a parking garage in downtown Santa Rosa, across the street from the hospital. Five out of the six decks had been poured already. It'd rained the night before. All over the new concrete were thin puddles that reflected pink and orange while it was still early enough for the sun to get through. I'd been enjoying this project: being downtown before the start of the day, watching as the doctors and nurses arrived in their nice cars. Sometimes they walked outside in blue scrubs to lunch in the park. Ambulances raced up to the ER several times a day with their sirens whirring. Once, a helicopter landed on the roof. It felt good knowing that there was a whole industry set up to protect and care for people like me.

\* \* \*

A concrete divider spanned the length of the *autopista*, which had almost no shoulder to speak of. We couldn't turn around, and back-

ing down the hill to an off-ramp looked dangerous, so we were stuck pushing uphill towards La Laguna. It grew darker, and colder, and we put on our tuxedo jackets to keep warm. Rob pushed and steered from behind the driver's door, jumping in to engage the hand brake whenever we needed a rest. I was in the back, trying not to hit my head on the pointed noses of our surfboards. So far, Rob handled this set-back well.

\* \* \*

What I remember most about my brother that morning was his eyes. They had an opaque look like the ocean gets on a cloudy day. Not reflecting, not transparent, they just absorbed everything with a bizarre flatness. He'd been that way on the car ride to work.

There were five of us busting rod on that deck: Rob and I tying columns, three others laying the grids on a ramp. We'd been working tens, starting at six. Around nine each morning, we took turns making a coffee-and-donut run.

I watched Rob cross the park, noticing that he'd forgotten to take off his tool belt. Then I went back to my columns, looking forward to a Boston Crème.

The other guys saw it first and screamed for me.

\*

At a gas station near La Laguna, a stray dog jumped onto my lap and refused to leave. Rob was inside, buying a bottle of water. The attendant filled the tank. Numbers ticked away along the gas pumps. The dog was big and gangly. Small angles of bone poked out all over his body. His short hair formed a tiger-striped pattern of brown and gray.

Rob stared at the dog through the driver's side door, the water bottle in his hand.

"He just jumped in," I said. The dog licked my face a couple of times, then sat on the floor and put his head in my lap.

"What should we do?" my brother asked. We turned to the gas attendant, who'd just finished filling the tank. He walked over and grabbed the dog by both ears, pulling hard and urging him with Spanish phrases that I didn't understand. The dog looked up at me sadly, but never barked or winced.

"Maybe we should drive around with him for a little while."

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My brother nodded and patted the attendant on the shoulder.

“We’ll get him a good meal and some water,” Rob climbed into the driver seat. “Let him have a decent night’s sleep and then release him again.”

The three of us took off in the car. The dog stayed on the floor and didn’t make a sound.

“What should we call him?”

“Good question. I wish I knew what the R stood for on the gas gauge. We could name him after that. Maybe we’ll call him Mr. Empty anyway.”

“Mr. Empty.” I tried the name out and liked the way my mouth wrapped around it. “That’s good.”

\* \* \*

By the time I looked down, the donut box had already exploded all over the doctor. His blue surgical scrubs were streaked with jelly, frosting, and chocolate sprinkles. The cardboard box laid flattened on the sidewalk that criss-crossed the park. With both hands, my brother pushed the doctor in the middle of the chest.

I undid the buckle and my tool-belt hit the ground. The rest of the crew followed me down the finished ramps at a full gallop. Rob was in a lot of fights as a kid, most of the time protecting me even when I didn’t know I needed protection. But nobody would call him a violent person.

From the street, I saw my brother whip the doctor with the pliers from his belt, striking him right across the cheek. The doctor’s body followed his face to the ground. Rob kicked him a couple of times in the belly, saying something that I could barely hear: some sentence with the phrase, “better than me,” in it.

I threw myself over the doctor while the rest of the crew grabbed Rob. I whispered, “It’s okay; he’s my brother,” as if that was supposed to comfort him.

\* \* \*

Mr. Empty got us promptly kicked out of the host-family’s house the next morning. He found some food during the night and made a big mess of the kitchen. There was a lot of screaming. In Spanish, Rob’s old host-mom apparently told us that we were typical ignorant and selfish Americans.

The sun hung low in the sky. There was no chance of heading back to Santa Cruz or La Laguna before nightfall. The road was now a narrow strip of asphalt hugging the edge of sheer cliffs over the water. As we left that last little town behind, our world became nothing but the giant vertical blackness of the earth and the endless flat blueness of the ocean. This place that my brother was taking me seemed to be the corner where these two things met. I didn't know much about the geography of this island, but I was pretty sure we were heading out to the northernmost point, the very tip of its rough triangle.

"I used to sleep out here all the time," my bother said, "just my backpack and my board. It's up around that next curve."

Mr. Empty sat up on my lap. The road descended closer to ocean level, and I could tell there must be some kind of cove—hopefully sandy—around the curve that Rob spoke of.

My brother and I didn't speak when we rounded that turn and saw that awful thing. Mr. Empty let out a long, squeaky yawn. This secret spot had become a construction site. One of those temporary sea-walls, like they use on a lot of bridge projects, was erected along the low-tide line. Bent pieces of re-bar stuck out of half-built concrete molds like some kind of robotic seaweed.

My brother looked at me with a wide open mouth: "What the fuck is this?" I shrugged. He stopped the car next to a stack of two-by-eights. We sat there for a second. I studied the re-bar, not just what was in the ground but also what was stacked further up by the road. Then it made sense.

"They're building more of those swimming pools!" I was proud of myself for figuring it out, and spoke too enthusiastically.

"For who?" My brother was angry. "We're in the middle of nowhere. What tourists would drive all the way out here? There's no hotels or nothing."

"Maybe that's next." I couldn't seem to say anything helpful. Rob looked like he might throw up. I opened the door and let Mr. Empty out. He pissed behind a pile of gravel.

Then I saw something that made me just as nauseous as my brother must've been. A set rolled in, and a good-size wave did its best to break. The reef was right on the outside of the sea-wall. A perfect barrel formed for half a second—a thin blue curtain with what looked

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like a nice shoulder walling up down the line—and then completely undid itself against the wall. A spray of whitewater came over and showered the construction site. I watched in silence as four more waves did the same.

As both a tourist and a construction worker, I felt as responsible as anybody for this monstrosity. It wasn't enough, I realized, to live decently and intend not to cause harm. There were consequences to everything we did and didn't do, and some of them were so big and ugly that not even the Atlantic Ocean could wash them away.

\* \* \*

That night, the three of us camped out beside the car. My brother and I put our tuxedos on over our clothes to keep warm, and built a fire with the scraps of lumber lying around. The concrete was bright under the almost-full moon. We made a meal of the bread and cheese that Rob had bought, and drank the six-pack of beer.

"These were the best days of my whole life," my brother said again.

"This is dodgy work," I looked down at the mess of concrete and rebar below us. "Look at the iron they're using. You can't pour shotcrete on a frame that thin. It's not even up to code."

"They have different codes here."

I burped and said, "I don't think there's much alcohol in this beer."

"There's none," Rob answered. "They were all out of real beer."

We slept inside of our surfboard bags, with Mr. Empty in between.

\* \* \*

There wasn't much talking the next morning. We had breakfast at the bar where Rob had bought the fake beer. As we sat there staring at the ocean, several trucks drove by carrying masons and workers. We picked over our Spanish tortilla and *cortados*, until finally a small, European version of a cement mixer headed past.

We drove in silence almost all the way back up that long snake



of a road. I tried to imagine the miniature cement truck handling all these corners. We stopped in San Andres and had a melancholy surf session. Mr. Empty was locked in the car. The waves were average at best.

On the way back through Santa Cruz, things were still silent between us. We passed by that complex of swimming pools. A few fat, pale tourists lingered in lounge chairs. My brother's eyes got that flat look again and he ground his teeth. As we turned and headed up the hill he made a fist and pounded on the dash a few times. The skin of his face puffed up and folded around his mouth and eyes. I feared we might have an accident, or that my brother might cut his hand on the exposed bolts of the dash, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything. He pounded a few more times. Mr. Empty let out a low, whining noise and tucked his head into his paws on the floor. After a minute they both stopped and there was only the sound of a small engine puttering up a hill. I wondered where we'd sleep but had no intention of asking. I figured I'd take a page from Mr. Empty's book and just deal with things as they happened.

\* \* \*

The clouds turned orange above La Laguna as we passed the main plaza. We drove right by the host family's place and headed up a small hill on the east side of town. My brother parked in front of a big stone house and the three of us got out.

A girl with short dark hair answered the door, said "Roberto!" and gave my brother the customary hug-with-kiss. She introduced herself as Teresa and invited us inside. We sat on a piece of furniture that was not a bench exactly, but more like a wooden couch. Mr. Empty curled up at my feet. On the wall across from us was a framed black-and-white drawing of two stick figures on horseback. The big one carried a long black stick. The short one was round and didn't seem to have hands. A cartoon sun with spider legs was above them, little windmills in the background. Teresa went to the kitchen.

"Who's she?"

"An old friend."

Teresa came back with a larger bottle of red wine and some small

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glass cups. She made another trip and brought a dish of almonds and a pack of cigarettes. "So," she poured the glasses nearly full. "You need someplace to stay tonight, no?" Her English was good. My brother nodded and took a gulp of wine.

"Thanks for having us," I said. Teresa smiled but kept her eyes on my brother.

"I hope you're not planning on doing anything stupid tomorrow," she lit a cigarette and exhaled.

My brother slouched further down in his chair and drained all of his wine in one long gulp. I stopped crunching halfway through an almond.

"Teresa," Rob said. "It's been a long day and I'm tired. Would you excuse me if I went to bed?" He must've stayed here before. My brother knew where he was going as he climbed her stairs. I turned to Teresa. "What did you mean by something stupid tomorrow? Tomorrow's the wedding."

"Yes. Maria's wedding. His ex-girlfriend's wedding." The cherry of Teresa's cigarette sizzled as she took another pull.

"I see." That explained why we hadn't met or hung out with anybody from the wedding party. "So my brother and Maria have a history."

"Of Course. They were engaged at one point. You didn't know this? I'm surprised he's even here. I'm sure she only sent him the invitation to make him jealous."

I thought about that invitation, when it must have arrived just before the incident with the surgeon. Mr. Empty snoozed at my feet. I didn't want to know any more about this situation. Knowledge hadn't been a friend in the last day or two. The more I learned about the nature of this trip, the more ridiculous it became.

"Did you draw that?" I pointed to the picture of the two horsemen on the wall.

She laughed out loud and said, "That was drawn by Pablo Picasso, the greatest artist in the history of Spain, quite possibly of the world. It's a drawing of the Quixote."

"The what?"

"Don Quixote, from the novel by Cervantes," she laughed more softly, "the greatest writer in the history of Spain, possibly the world."

Did you drop out of university like your brother?"

"No, I got my degree. But I never read that book."

"The tall one cares only about immortalizing his legacy and setting right all the wrongs in the world. The fat one, he cares only about eating and sleeping and taking care of his little donkey. For Cervantes, that duality is what summarized all of human nature."

I kept staring at it. Teresa turned to me and said, "Can I touch your fingers?"

She was studying the hand I had wrapped around my wine glass.

"You have workingman's fingers, don't you?"

"Yes, I do." I put the glass on the table and offered my hand. One by one, she held my fingers and rubbed her thumb along their dry surfaces, pushing a few times on the thick calluses at their ends.

"They're like little, how do you say...sausages."

"We're rod busters," I said, "Iron workers. We tie rebar together all day long."

"But you have an education, no?"

"My degree is useless. This is good money. It's just easier."

"Easier?" Teresa held my hand straight up and poked at the callus atop my middle finger. "Breaking the back all day, making your hands hard as leather, this is easy?"

"I get good benefits. My brother and I go surfing on the weekends at Balinas or Salmon Creek. We can afford to take vacations." Everyone seemed convinced that my life was miserable except for me. "Things could be a lot worse."

"Does your brother think so too?"

I took a big gulp of wine. "So, you were friends with Rob and Maria back then?"

"Yes, we were students together."

"Those must've been amazing times."

"It was fun, sure. I think your brother remembers them as better than they were. We had troubles back then as well. But some people see only good in the past, and bad in the present."

Mr. Empty yawned and rolled over on his side. "Can I sleep on this couch?" I asked.

"It's not comfortable." She gave the hard surface a knock with her fist. "You can sleep in my bed."

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She was still examining my right hand, so I finished the wine with my left and stood up. Before heading upstairs, I took one last look at the painting of the fat guy and the skinny guy, riding around trying to make things right.

I was wearing the tuxedo jacket over my board-shorts and t-shirt. Mr. Empty followed along behind. She held my hand in the normal way as she led me up the stairs. I heard my brother snore as we walked down the hall. Mr. Empty curled up on a rug inside her bedroom.

I took off my tuxedo jacket, said, "Thanks for letting me stay here," and crawled into bed. To be polite, I turned my head toward the door, thinking she might want to change or undress or something. The light went out and I felt her slide in beside me on the mattress.

"Your shorts," she said almost immediately, "they're wet. You'll catch cold."

If there was one word which described my role on this entire trip, it would be 'passenger'. My brother was the one driving our disaster; I just helped out with navigation. As Teresa convinced me to take off my barely damp board-shorts and t-shirt, there was no doubt which one of us held the steering wheel.

She took my hand in hers again and returned to its roughest parts. The place where the pliers rubbed against the ridge of my index finger she put under the crease of her breast. She seemed to like feeling my calluses up against her skin—which was all softer than a baby's. Maybe I was a novelty to her. Maybe, in her world, she didn't meet too many construction workers who hadn't a clue about books or paintings and she figured I'd be gone in a few days anyway so what the hell. That didn't bother me. I wanted to stay here again, if my brother didn't do something terrible at the wedding. It beat sleeping inside a surfboard bag and a tuxedo at the edge of a construction site. If I was nothing but a passenger, and my role was only to comply with the driver, then this was so far the best part of the job.

\* \* \*

Maria was a beautiful bride. Seeing her from our seats in the

cathedral, with her German groom and his big grin, I wondered what my brother had been thinking—leaving a girl like that, and a place like this. He could have moved here, had they gotten married. So far, Rob was composed. We watched the ceremony, standing up and sitting down every few minutes, sometimes kneeling on the bench before us. Our tuxedos were wrinkled and smelled of campfire and dog hair, the pockets full of sand and dirt. Teresa was on one side of Rob in a low-cut green dress. I was on the other. Both of us were ready to pounce if he made any sudden moves. It hurt a little to think of my brother this way—as a liability. I was thankful that Teresa was there to help.

I couldn't understand a word that the priest said, but I listened to the tone of his voice. There was the happy stuff, the things that brought us together here today. There were words of warning, sentences meant to scare the young couple into fidelity. Then the priest delivered a string of syllables that sounded like little more than a flippant formality. There was a pause, everyone looked around, and I knew that it was the 'speak now or forever hold your peace' business. I turned to my brother. Teresa grabbed his hand and squeezed it. To me, that was the most beautiful thing I'd seen her do since meeting her yesterday afternoon. That day in the park in Santa Rosa, I didn't even go to him. I worried only about the guy on the ground. It never occurred to me that my brother was, in a way, a victim as well.

Now I took his other hand and he turned to me. It didn't feel like the act of forced physical restraint that I'd imagined. My brother's eyes no longer had the flat cold-ocean-on-a-cloudy-day look that they'd had on that morning last spring, or driving by those swimming pools yesterday. The priest started up again and I was sure that this bad situation had gotten a little bit better.

\* \* \*

At the reception, I filled my stomach to capacity for the first time in several days. The caterers restocked the buffet of Canarian and Spanish dishes faster than I could eat: octopus in butter sauce, pickled red peppers on toasted bread, those tiny delicious potatoes boiled and salted. I filled my pockets full of chorizos and cured ham and took

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them out to Mr. Empty who waited in the car. Champagne bottles popped open and fat cigars sparked up everywhere. Teresa pulled me onto the dance floor. I didn't spend much time talking to Rob, but he seemed content to sit on the couch, smoke a Canarian cigar, and watch. I'd seen him give Maria a big hug, and shake the hand of the groom, who I understood was studying to be a gynecologist. No longer worried that he'd do anything stupid, I raised a glass of champagne in his direction, from across the room. He smiled at me and lifted his glass. Now it was he who was happy to see me having a good time.

As the party wound down, a lot of the younger people climbed into cabs. Teresa led me by the hand. She grabbed a bottle of champagne from off the catering table on her way out. We crowded into a taxi with two other couples, all drunk and babbling in Spanish.

"What about my brother?" I asked.

"He's fine," she said. "He told me he'd meet up with us in an hour or two."

"Where are we going?"

She chuckled at me, "the beach, silly." I felt a half-second of concern. Teresa kissed me on the mouth and I forgot all about my brother.

\* \* \*

We pulled up to that imported white-sand beach that I'd passed by so many times. Teresa led me to some planted palms. The sand lit up under the full moon. She popped the cork off her bottle of champagne, took a swig, then handed it to me. As I lifted the fizzing bottle to my lips, she started undoing my cummerbund. This was a relief, as my too-full belly had been bulging against my too-skinny tuxedo for hours.

I twisted the bottle into the sand and suddenly wondered about my brother. Was this his chance to do something awful involving the bride and groom? Was the intermission between his explosions now over? Wasn't he supposed to avoid alcohol on his medication? I pictured him driving around with Mr. Empty now, our rental car able to putter a bit faster with one less passenger, his face red and puffed like yesterday.

Teresa tossed my cummerbund on the sand and undid the buttons of my pants. We were still connected at the mouth and I did my best to rub the roughest parts of my sausage hands against whatever bare skin her dress allowed.

I pictured my brother driving behind the limousine, following the bride and groom back to their hotel. His eyeballs would have that stormy ocean glaze again. Would he make a move in the parking lot or follow them all the way up to the room? It would be a blunt object. Of that I had no doubt. A hammer or tire iron, even a foot or two of five-bar and my brother would make hamburger of that poor German medical student.

Teresa lifted her green dress up over her head. Her skin shone white as new plaster under the moon. The studs of my borrowed tuxedo shirt dropped onto the sand like dead bugs. I should've seen this coming, everyone will say.

My tuxedo shirt was open under my coat. Teresa pulled me by the lapels on top of her and the cool African sand. All I could think of was my insane brother, shedding blood over a girl he barely knew anymore but believed to be the answer to his unhappiness. I thought of the bond that some brothers are supposed to have, to be able to sense when each other is in trouble and communicate telepathically and so on. I tried to send some kind of message to him, as my hardened hands wrapped around Teresa's baby-soft breast, but I couldn't feel it working.

And then I heard his voice. Rob called out my name. I lifted myself off Teresa for a second and listened. He was here, at this beach, looking for me. I heard him call my name again and then the woof, woof of Mr. Empty barking for the first time since I'd met him.

"Don't go," Teresa whispered.

I grabbed my cummerbund off the sand.

"I have to," I said. "He's my brother."

"You can stay," she wasn't arguing, just telling, like this was one among many facts that she knew and I didn't. "You don't have to leave."

\* \* \*

I found Rob and we jumped in the car without talking. As we drove under a streetlamp in the beach parking lot, I saw something horrible. In that little upholstered space behind the seats, where our tuxedos had been, there was a sledgehammer and a crow bar, a pair of pliers. I stared at them for minutes on end, even as we left the streetlight and they sat there in darkness. Nothing but bars and clubs were open at this hour on this island; I couldn't imagine where my brother had gotten these tools.

"You can't do this," I said to him. "It's wrong. You'll regret it."

"I have to do this," he said. "I love this place too much."

\* \* \*

He drove faster than I thought our little car was capable of. This seemed like my ultimate hour as passenger: sitting shotgun by my brother, who was determined to do something terrible and violent, and incapable of saying anything that would re-direct his course. Still, I couldn't help thinking of Teresa's last words to me, and wondering if she meant I didn't have to leave her there on the stolen sand, or that I didn't have to leave this island at all. I wondered if it could work, provided I got through tonight unscathed somehow. Maybe this was something better than busting rod back home.

I stopped racing these thoughts through my mind long enough to look around. Where were we? We weren't approaching Santa Cruz. We were in the middle of nowhere. Our rental car wound over a few tight curves and crested a hill. Below us, the ocean lit up under the moonlight. My brother was driving us back out to the north of the island, to where we'd spent the night before last. Mr. Empty sat on my lap and stuck his head out the window in anticipation. Rob took out two more local cigars for me to light as he drove. I glanced over at the gas gauge and noticed that the needle was once again almost on R. There's no way we'd have enough gas to get us back.

\* \* \*

Once we arrived at the jobsite, my brother handed me the sledge-hammer. He took the crow-bar and pair of rusty pliers. Piece



by piece, we demolished the half-built tourist attraction. A cracked yellow hard-hat was left lying around, and my brother put it on as a joke. I knocked all of the frames down with the sledge, while Rob un-did the rebar skeletons of the soon-to-be swimming pools. As if to do his part, Mr. Empty took a big shit on top of a stack of rough-cut lumber.

Under that full moon, chomping on those big cigars, with our coat-tails blowing around in the breeze, I felt like we were a team of vigilantes out righting the world's wrongs. That ridiculous helmet wobbled atop my brother's rueful figure, as he plunged his weapon right through the heart of the giant forces of tourism.

Maybe this was all stupid. Perhaps these pools would only be rebuilt, even stronger and more permanent. It's possible all we'd accomplish is putting some construction laborers—people like us—out of work for a while.

But to be honest, I didn't look at this act of demolition as a means to an end. It was more about the weight of the tool in my hand, the sound of splintering wood, and the good feeling of doing something alongside my brother. It was more like surfing.

We loosened everything we could on the temporary sea wall, then busted out a couple of the side panels. Salt water filled up our dress shoes and soaked the bottoms of our creased tuxedo pants. We ran to the high ground and then watched for a while as the tide came up and the ocean finished off that awful wall. The sand sucked out around its foundation and its vertical posts leaned. Waves slammed against the outside. Soon, the whole thing was in pieces and slowly drifting out to sea.

"Rob," I was nervous, but knew it was time to speak. "I'm not leaving. I'm staying in Tenerife. Teresa said I could."

"That's good." He kept his eyes on the horizon. "That's a good idea."

We sat on the hood of our rental car and puffed on cigars. Mr. Empty pounded his tail on the packed dirt of the road and watched just as eagerly. Soon, the sun came up through the distant clouds, and its little spider legs cast an enchanted kind of light over all the things we'd made and unmade.

Jim Tilley

*Jim Tilley*

## **Not Handed Down**

When money was tight one Christmas, my father  
made our presents himself with the jigsaw  
handed down from his father.

It had a red wooden handle, steel U-shaped frame,  
and a delicate blade that would bow and catch

when it wasn't directed with finesse  
at just the right pace through the Norman Rockwell  
cover he had snipped from *The Saturday Evening Post*  
and pasted onto a sheet of plywood,  
the saw's tiny teeth chewing along the lines

he had penciled in familiar shapes on the back.  
Why he went to all the trouble I never figured out,  
because my sister always ignored all hints  
a puzzle yields, not once inspecting the picture first,  
instead turning all the pieces face side down,

then assembling the puzzle from the inside outward.  
That's what it takes when the picture starts to fade,  
when one patch of pale blue sky bleached with clouds  
becomes so like any other it might as well  
be turned over, the paper peeling from one layer

of memory after another, no sister around to help  
sort out upside-downness, and no jigsaw handed down  
by a father to guide it through splintering wood.  
I recall he made streetlamps for my Lionel train set  
to line the tracks twisting through the tunnel.

*Peter Moore*

ALL MY AFFECTION

I adopt two cockroaches as pets.  
So they won't grow lonely.  
I whisper sweet nothings in their antennae.  
It's like brushing out a loved one's hair.  
They prefer scheduled walks  
And enjoy the controlled freedom.  
They clamor to overhear diatribes  
And relish doomsday soapboxes.  
They have no patience for heroes & villains.  
Read *The Social Contract* without end  
And like Rousseau, love old Tarzan movies  
But unlike Jean-Jacques, prefer  
Religions with confusing dogmas.  
Live, love, and laugh with abandon.  
Hate the sound of walnuts cracking.  
And like us, fear only sudden light.

*Peter Moore*

## At the Field Hospital

This was no ordinary gnome. He wore combat fatigues.  
Initially, he claimed to be a Gurkha with the 22<sup>nd</sup> battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> *something*.  
Finally, he admitted that there was long tradition throughout history  
Of gnome mercenaries who had changed the course of many a decisive battle.  
That they had their heyday in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the red, blue and green uniforms  
Denoting their "allegiance to none and all." That was their motto.  
Garibaldi was the most famous fighting gnome.  
That gnomes in all their garden variety  
Were neither sedentary, nor reverent itinerants.  
And how the world erected statues in their honor.  
And what it truly meant to be unknown.

*Sharma Shields*

## Sunshine and the Predator

Dad said, If you're bored, be like the Blue Collar Kids.

Get a frigging job.

Within the week I was being interviewed by Harold Gibbons, General Manager of Astorville Center Theme Parks. He was a burly man. The ball of his nose was red and bumpy like a kneecap.

"How old?" he asked.

"I just turned fourteen."

"What grade?"

"Freshman. Sophomore in the Fall."

"You some kind of genius or something?"

"No," I said. "I just skipped a grade."

"Eh. No wonder you're so thin."

He sucked on his large gums and motioned for me to follow. The park was sandblasted with sun and very vacant. We walked down a road that someone had painted to look like yellow bricks and then down a smaller pathway painted to look like dirt.

"Nice paint," I said. "It looks really real."

"Eh."

"Did you paint this?" I asked. Gibbons laughed.

"Are you kidding?" He loosened the brown tie at his neck and shook his head. Dad had suggested I just keep my mouth shut and smile, so I forced a smile and my cheeks wobbled. Gibbons didn't notice.

The fake dirt pathway led to a big mechanical apparatus. Lights and buzzers were going off and really loud speakers played Metallica. The ride rotated around a large red column painted with screaming faces. On the floor, secured by screws the size of my head, were seats that looked like the booths in a pizza joint, except these were missing a table and had seatbelts.

"The Rock 'N' Roller," Gibbons said. "It's not one of our most exciting rides, but it pulls in a decent amount of clients."

"Wow," I yelled over the music, "it's really, really neat!"

"This machine is not a toy." Gibbons glanced at me, annoyed.

Sharma Shields

"It's dangerous. I once found a raccoon pulverized between the rotating floor and the bars underneath. And raccoons, you know, are bigger than some babies."

I nodded and felt genuinely afraid.

"Do people take babies on these rides?"

"Hey Joan!" Gibbons turned away from me and hollered, "Come here. I want you to meet Miss Sunshine."

A girl staring at us from the ticket console licked her lips and approached. She was wearing jean shorts and a bikini top. I recognized her from gym class. We were usually the last selections for team lineups.

"Hi Joan," I said.

"Oh," she blinked. "It's you. Yeah, hey. What's up?"

"Great. You two know one another." Gibbons glanced at his watch and burped. "Listen, Erin here is going to be our new ride operator."

"Alright." Joan shrugged. "Whatever."

"Joan handles the tickets. Now she won't have to do both."

"Yeah." Joan rolled her eyes and snorted. "I *really* need the help. It's *so* fricking busy."

"Great. I'll let you two catch up then." To me Gibbons said, "Come and see me when you're finished here." When he hit the pathway, he turned around to shout at Joan, "And put on some clothes, young lady!"

Once he was out of earshot, I told Joan, "He's really nice."

"Sure." She snapped a shoulder strap on her bikini. "A real peach."

"How long have you known him?"

"Ha," she said. "Just my whole life."

"I don't—"

"He's my uncle, nitwit," Joan's eyes crawled over me. "What was your last name again? Sunshine?"

"Oh no," I laughed. "No, that was his name for me, not my real name. I'm Erin. Erin Crubbsfeld."

"Your Dad's on those commercials, right? Crubbsfeld Developers or whatever?" When I nodded, she whistled all low and exaggerated. "That's muy, muy impressive."

"Muy?"

"It's Spanish for very."

"Oh," I said, trying to sound casual even though I stood there like I was made of coat hangers. "That's really cool."

"Anyway, Sunshine," Joan said, "this job's a cakewalk. Kids get stoned, give tickets, get on, get off. No problem. Sometimes you can get free joints."

"Joints?" I winced at the fear in my voice and wished that I had kept my mouth shut, but Joan didn't seem to notice. She just rambled on, scratching at her lip with a blood-red fingernail.

"This ride is like sitting in a car. People always bitch about it. But there's never puke. That's one major plus. Still, there's mopping at the end of the night. Dirt from people's shoes and stuff." She brightened. "And since you're the new girl, the mopping is your job."

This didn't exactly seem fair, but Dad was always mentioning hierarchies, and so I guessed I'd be what he'd describe as The-Low-Girl-On-The-Totem-Pole. Maybe it would be a good thing. One of Dad's favorite mantras was, Humiliation Begets Dignity.

"Well I suppose," I said, growing uncomfortably sweaty in my interview clothes, "I should go and talk to your uncle about times and stuff. You know, work-related stuff."

"Yeah," she nodded. "I guess."

My face had grown tomato red. I waved and walked quickly away.

"Adios, Sunshine!" Joan hollered over the Metallica.

Dad, surprised I landed the job, said, Gibbs must have liked your honest face.

When I arrived for the first day of work, a guy dressed in a clown suit was sitting with Joan in one of the Rock N' Roller booths, his white hand creeping up her thigh, and his oversized goods – ultra-large plastic glasses and bright balloons twisted into animal shapes – bloomed like weird tropical flowers from the booth behind them. He smiled at me through his painted-on frown. He looked like the reason people are afraid of clowns.

"Hello," I said, waving. Joan saw me, leaned into the clown and whispered something through his fuzzy red wig. They bent away from one another, laughing. He slapped her thigh gently. I gulped.

“When should I...get started?”

Joan rolled her eyes.

“Just hang out, Sunshine. No one shows up until sundown anyway.”

“Hang out?” I asked.

The rotating floor wasn't rotating, the heavy metal wasn't blaring.

“Yeah,” she said, “just chill out.”

The clown wouldn't stop grinning at me through his big, painted frown. I shuddered.

“This is Eli!” Joan shouted. “He's a real clown.” They started laughing again.

I felt awkward standing there like a ghoul and ogling them, so I went and sat by myself on the stairs, hugging my legs. The sun toasted my arms. I put my head on the warmth and dozed off. The next thing I knew, a big hand was shaking me awake.

“Hey Princess!” Gibbons roared. “You're neglecting this machine. Do you know what happens when you neglect this machine? Clients die! Babies die!”

*Raccoons die*, I thought, and rose to my feet sputtering, “Oh- I'm sorry, I—” I looked to Joan for help. She lolled in a booth by herself, reading a thick romance novel.

“Aw, leave her alone,” Joan said, without looking up from her book. “I told her to just hang out. There's no reason to start blasting music before people even *get* here, Uncle Harold.”

Gibbons pivoted his big blotchy body toward her. “You want to keep your job, right?”

Joan shut her mouth. She pretended to be reading.

“Answer me.”

“Yes, Uncle Harold.” She put the book down between her knees and sulked. Then, to me, he said, “She gives you any trouble, you come and talk to me, alright?”

“Yes sir,” I nodded. “I will right away, sir.”

He straightened, putting his hands on his hips, gazing at me as if confused. He shifted to Joan and said, “Behave, young lady.” And then he was gone.

“Aw,” she said, coming over and sitting beside me on the stairs, “he's a pain in the butt. Muy, muy annoying.”



spinning on her invisible tightrope.

"Why not?" I asked. I was shocked. I had pictured us cruising around the halls together, stopping at our lockers to laugh at teachers and gossip about boys.

"School's not for me," she said. "It sucks there. Besides, Eli's eighteen and he's starting at Fisher in the Fall. He says there's a whole rat race out there that he's made for. And he can be the breadwinner, you know? That's muy perfect with me."

I leaned against the back of the Rock 'N' Roller, next to an ugly thread of cords that twisted like intestines from the machine's gut.

"I think this job is pretty neat," I said casually, hoping to keep the conversation light. "I had fun working with you today."

Joan stopped pacing the tightrope and tilted her chin so that the empty cigarette pack swooped to the ground.

"Do you think those girls are pretty?" she asked.

"Alison and them?"

She nodded.

"Yeah, I do."

She looked disappointed.

I added quickly, "I used to be good friends with Alison, when we were little."

Joan ignored this.

"What about me. Do you think I'm pretty?"

"I think you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen," I said. "Way prettier than any of them."

And I really believed it. Especially when she smiled as she did then, and the dimples appeared next to her mouth like tiny pools of light. Her hair was supremely blonde, the sort of albino-blonde usually reserved for small children, and her eyes were wide and almost crossed, giving her a sort of candid innocence. She slouched like an older woman comfortable with the body she was given, and although you could see that she was not particularly coordinated, there was a sort of curvy grace to her that the other girls lacked.

"It'd be neat to look like you," I said.

I supposed the word I was groping for was sexy, but even if I had thought of it, I would never have uttered it aloud.

"Aw, you don't mean that," Joan said.

I remained silent because I knew that she knew that I meant it. I meant it very much.

Joan smiled and seemed to forget her past melancholia.

"Well," she said, "let's close shop. I'm muy famished." She set about, humming. With her back turned, I quickly retrieved the abandoned cigarette pack and placed it in the garbage can.

Dad said, Andrew Gunderson told me about your trashy co-worker. Watch that she doesn't rub off on you.

Andrew Gunderson was Eli Gunderson's father. He was also Dad's attorney.

I ignored what he said. Joan was one of the only girls my age that wanted to talk to me. It didn't bother me that she called me Sunshine, or that she left me alone, sometimes for hours, to eat cotton candy with Eli on the green pavement behind The Rock 'N' Roller. I was happy that I felt comfortable around her, and I admired that she wasn't such a Daddy's girl.

I told her this once and she said, "Well, it's easy when Daddy's dead."

I supposed that's why she lived downtown with Gibbons and his frail wife. I felt wretched for bringing it up. When I apologized, Joan said, "No prob," which made me like her even more.

The job, itself, was inconsistent. Whole nights would pass with maybe three customers. Other nights I would be there late, mopping up dirt and spilled soda, while Joan skipped down the fake dirt and out to freedom. The most exciting time was when some boy dropped his baseball cap. He unbuckled his seatbelt mid-ride and crawled over to the edge of the rotating floor to retrieve it. I roared "Hold on!" at him with a voice louder than I had ever used in my entire life, and then slowed the floor to a stop. "You could get your fingers caught," I scolded. "This floor is not a toy." The boy gaped at me. His lower lip trembled. It was better to have a frightened boy than a dead one. Joan was impressed and relayed the event to Gibbons. He gave me my first ten-cent raise.

Dad said, Ten cents doesn't seem like much, but it all adds up.

The best days were the days when Eli didn't show up, when I didn't have to slink away and leave Joan and him alone. On those days, Joan and I would shut down The Rock 'N' Roller early and

voice. Sometimes I hear it ringing through my head even when he's not around. He likes to say he's a predator."

"A predator?" Joan snorted. "That's classic." She pulled some lip-gloss from her pocket and applied it, then offered it to me. "Do you like them?"

"My parents?" I asked, accepting the lip-gloss. "I love them."

"No, I know," Joan said, annoyed. "But do you like them? I mean, do you want to *be* like them?"

I considered this.

"I can't imagine being like my dad. But I don't know if that's because I don't like him or because I'm afraid of him."

"The predator," Joan mouthed thoughtfully. Then she leaned forward and dug her sharp fingernails into my knee. "If I tell you something," she said over the music, "keep it a secret."

I nodded, enraptured.

"I slept with Eli." She released me and leaned back with an air of triumph.

"Oh," I said. "Wow." I couldn't think of anything else to say except, "Good for you."

"Are you being mean?" Joan scowled at me. "Or are you being serious?"

"No," I said quickly. "Good for you. Truly."

"It was nothing." She lifted one shoulder and then dropped it, smiling with one side of her pretty mouth. I waited a moment while she gazed out at the earth revolving past us.

"So you're not mad at him anymore?"

"No." She shook her head. "All's good. I'm pretty sure we're on the same page now." I hesitated without meaning to. I tried to smile like the dark cloud hadn't been there, but she was already sitting up and asking, "What? What was that look for?"

"No," I said, "it's nothing. It's just... I don't know. What, exactly, is the same page?"

Joan stood and grasped the edge of the booth for balance. "I love him, okay? What's wrong with that?"

"Don't be mad at me. I'm happy for you. I'm really, really, really, happy for you."

I must have sounded insincere.

"I wouldn't expect such a rich prude to understand." She glowered at me. "You may not be as pretty as Alison, but you're just as much of a snob."

She stomped off the ride before I started crying. I'm sure that if Joan had seen me crying she would have apologized, as usual, and maybe what happened next would never have happened at all.

When someone approached the ticket console, I wiped at my face and walked tipsily across the floor. I leaped down so that I was next to the column, where the levers were, and then pulled The Rock 'N' Roller to a stop. I rearranged my face into fake cheer. The customer was a tall, handsome boy. I didn't recognize him at first. Eli, without the clown get-up.

"Oh," I said, surprised. "Joan's out back, I think."

But then Joan was behind me. She gave my arm an angry little pinch.

"Hello, lover," she said to Eli, a greeting that made him squirm. "Geekwad here thinks we're not on the same page."

He looked confused.

"Please don't bring me into this," I said meekly.

"Come here," she cooed, pulling him by the sleeve. "I want to talk to you." Then, in my ear she hissed, "About last night."

Her whole face became reptilian to me, all tense angles and slit eyes. The sun began to set. People milled peacefully about the park, some with their arms around one another's waists. And then there was Joan, with the lights of the Rock 'N' Roller casting her face purple and yellow and red. I wanted her to be pretty again, to convince Eli gently. But she looked like a 3-D version of the faces screaming on the large red column behind her. I visualized her floating up and into them, swallowed forever by rage and fear.

They stood beside one of the booths somewhat near me, although I could only hear what they were saying when they shouted. I wanted to turn down the music, thinking it would help to relieve some of the tension. Eli looked indifferent. He kept holding up his hands as she poked and prodded him.

Their conversation ended abruptly.

Joan burst into tears and gave Eli a resolute shove. He tripped backwards, overcorrected his balance, and then fell face forward

wires between the facts and my emotions. "He snapped his neck."

"Eli." She knelt beside him and poked him in the chest. "Eli," she whispered. Poke-poke. "Eli."

When she turned to puke, I went for the mop. I cleaned up after Joan while she mumbled incoherent, rambling sentences.

Finally she asked, "Where's his shoe?"

"It's stuck in The Rock 'N' Roller floor."

"How'd he snap his neck?"

"His foot was stuck. The floor rotated. His head struck that one panel."

Joan fumbled with her lip. She fumbled with Eli's lips.

"He's so cold," she said.

"He's dead."

She nodded, sniffing. Joan rose and returned with Eli's shoe. She put it on his foot.

"Like Cinderella," she said. She put her face in her hands and cried again.

I knew Gibbons would come looking for us. He'd wonder why The Rock 'N' Roller wasn't rockin' and rollin'.

I said to her, "This is our fault. We killed him."

"I didn't kill him." Joan shook her head.

"None of this would have happened if his foot--"

"Why did you start it up?"

"I needed to," I sighed. "For the customers."

"There were customers?"

"No, but I thought I'd start it up. You know, to interest them."

Joan nodded. I had one mean, victorious thought that she wasn't as smart as I was, and then I retreated back into my fear and guilt.

"But the lights," she continued, "the music. They weren't on when I showed up."

I thought for a second that I'd been caught.

"Well, of course not. I'd found him by then, remember?"

"Oh gawd," she said. "I'm going to be sick again."

Gibbons appeared, cursing and huffing. The three boys that had flipped me off followed at his heels. Had they seen everything? I started to my feet, about to confess. I was going to admit that I had lied to Joan out of fear, but even if I hadn't lied it was still a horrible,

freakish accident. But when Gibbons saw Eli's body lying there, he raised one large red hand and the boys scattered like birds. Apparently they just wanted free rides. I decided to keep my big mouth shut.

Dad told me, Of course it was an accident. You're a young girl and you don't know it yet, but time takes care of these things. In a couple of years, you'll barely remember what happened.

Everyone else believed that too. An accident. Gibbons even wondered that first night, gazing down at Eli's body, if I weren't covering for Joan. During the hearing, she sat regarding me with those slightly-crossed eyes that no longer gave her a look of innocence but rather a look of dumb fright. When Mr. Gunderson approached my parents and me, hand outstretched in forgiveness, Dad told me, Stand up straight and stop whining.

I accepted the hand and then a hug, and wondered how Mr. Gunderson could feign such manliness.

*I killed your son, I wanted to remind him. That is not something you forgive.*

Mr. Gunderson did not offer the same warm hand or sweaty armpits to Joan.

I went up to her afterwards and she stared at me as though through a fog. She smelled of clove cigarettes.

"Hey." She asked, "How are you?"

"I'm okay," I said. "I feel really guilty."

It was the truth.

"Yaw," Joan said. "I hear that." She played with her lip, a nervous habit recently acquired, and said, "There's just some things that don't make sense. Why didn't he scream? Why didn't he call out to you?"

"The music," I said. "Or maybe, he was unconscious."

She glowered at me.

"That's what you said during the hearing, Erin. Word by word."

I swallowed a lump in my throat.

"You're my only friend," I told her. I wanted to tell Joan the truth.

*I just wanted to scare him. That's all. For you. All for you.*

"I can't think about this anymore," she said. "Maybe I'll see you when school starts."

On the way home Dad said, It's a tragedy when such a young

man dies before fulfilling his potential.

Joan must have switched schools. I only saw her once more. I was interning for my father's company the summer after my first year of college. Dad and I walked down a street in one of Astorville's downtown neighborhoods. He was showing me a building that he might tear down for new condominiums. Joan was there, sitting on the steps of the building, smoking a cigarette. She gazed up at us with those funny, crisscrossed eyes.

"Hi, Joan," I said. My stomach somersaulted.

"Oh hey," she drawled. "It's you."

She studied my father and me, and then grimaced. "Sunshine and the Predator."

While he took me by the elbow and steered me into the building Dad said, That type of woman is always on drugs.

I shook my arm free of him. I went back outside. Joan had crossed the street and I could see the curves of her shoulders bobbing away from me, disappearing around a corner. I started following her but the light changed, the cars accelerated, and I was stuck. It was useless. We were all stuck.

I reentered the building and overheard Dad tell a man in a business suit, It helps in this business to be merciless. He turned and saw me standing there. Oh, here's my daughter now. Dad said, Come here Erin.

The man in the business suit extended his hand. He smiled at me with perfect white teeth. To my father, he said, "The resemblance is uncanny."

*Gemma Guillermo*

p.1, The Pineapple Fields...

The Pineapple Fields of Moanaloa Valley

No mist, no rainfall,  
just the tang of pineapple fields.  
Field workers huddled over urchin crowns,  
thorns like beestings in their palms.  
*ti*-leaf green paint peeled off like eczema  
from empty plantation homes.

At six I saw my first  
dead body, old Manang Nita.  
She lay in Maria Clara lace,  
face white like Kabuki paint,  
lips chalked tomato-red.

Dream sequence crime scene  
embellished over the years  
mesmerized me, touched me.  
Such painstaking artistry  
Such careful staging of props in a play--  
the broken Jesus statue,  
her bloody handprints on linoleum,  
torn kitchen curtains, broken doorframe.

The aunties were all weeping,  
as expected in all melodramas.  
They circled in pairs, serving *lumpia*  
and overripe pineapple  
cut from the fields  
behind Manang's house.  
I never met her alive,  
but we all came from Kaunakakai town,

p.2, The Pineapple Fields...

to view the show, the spectacle  
and eat plate after plate of  
sickly sweet fruit  
the color of her coffin's satin.



*Gemma Guillermo*  
Opihi Pickers

Stealthy  
like famed pearl divers  
small-time, local boys  
scale rocks' underbelly  
sharp knives in pounding surf  
scrape lava crowns,  
pry off gems,  
delicate royalty  
in the mouth.

Braille dots cover  
jagged caves,  
barnacle domed  
but finer  
ridged, resemble  
Chinese straw hats,  
miniature Mount Fujis.

Shucked, oil-slick  
rainbow colors  
swirled in obsidian jelly.  
Some divers can't wait,  
pop them raw,  
savor juicy muscles,  
liquid *shoyu*.

Reach for another fix,  
*kamaboko* slippers  
slip into breakneck surf,  
drown,  
tasting ecstasy.

*Gemma Guillermo*

p.1, Nightdriving in Manila  
Nightdriving in Manila

Bicycle man yells, *taaaho!*  
sweet soy clots slide down my throat  
swirling in coconut tamarind mango  
sewage, sweating raw meat, pearl gray  
in pots steaming ginger and garlic.

Squatters huddle over  
fistfuls of light, laughter stacks  
beneath scaffold thistles.  
Night's armpit covers tinfoil slums  
steaming piss roaches river carcass.

Torch ginger hibiscus filter hotel lobbies,  
float across paper lanterns  
lawnparties drenched in linen, where  
tailored barongs and butterfly ternos faint  
from wild orchid chloroform.

Across Rojas Boulevard  
sampaguita blossoms  
spill broken rosaries at Rizal's feet,  
his bronze effigy bears  
my skin, ill-fitting

disguise blends me with  
my brothers, barefoot boys  
peddling dogchains in traffic,  
my sisters strutting  
carnelian backalleys.

p.2, Nightdriving in Manila

Cockfighters crow dawn.  
I roll down my window.  
The fever begins.

*Rita D. Costello*

Penn: To Live Beyond Pronunciation

After work he sits on the mattress emptying  
his bag of prophylactics: the rubber gloves  
he pulls to the wrist and snaps before touching  
any patient or at home before dyeing his roommate's hair  
and then the foil-wrapped condoms. He stands

outside the university library where he used to bring his dog to run  
without leash or collar in the early winter darkness. Together  
they churned the expanse of flat white into muddied heaps  
before the college kids could even roll out of bed. He runs now

because this isn't the first time. The first time he sat perched  
cross-legged between the tenth floor stacks reading about disease.  
When the young man walked up with his bleached out hair  
and thick fingers pulling down zippers, research was forgotten  
to fluid and skin, the risk of discovery. He stands breathless

in the small-space stale of elevator air. His stomach  
churns with excitement upsurged by quick displacement.  
It is an habitual journey to touch strangers: from the hospital  
to the brief stop at home and then on to the tenth floor. He sits afterwards

at the café across the street listening to the rumors. Words  
which never truly exist before being met physically take shape  
amidst the coffee and curling cigarette smoke: Atom bombs  
AIDS and the tenth floor of the university's prestigious library. Tomorrow at work  
he will return to treating strangers from behind a shield of latex.

*Larry Crist*  
Reunion

They waited tables and ran the bar. And we were always in restaurants or bars, theatrical pit stops, and they—the actor/waiter was easy to spot: well-groomed, articulate, ON. Introducing themselves in a breezy upbeat manner, a joke or suggestion. They knew you by your company, your clothes and conversation, your ubiquitous actor-bag.

You couldn't be more naked unless you were naked. Eventually, everyone came to New York, as had Robertson and I. You could pass through every town and city on earth and wouldn't see half of who you might by just hanging around the corners of 8th & 42nd street. Which was close to where we began drinking that day, Saint Paddy's Day, making up for the past ten years.

"Remember Tartuffe?" I ask Robertson, after our actor/waiter has left us a second round, "You had that stupid mustache and we were both downstage facing out, and I didn't see it happen but noticed the audience was finding your speech funny? It had never been funny before. Then I looked over and your mustache was hanging off your upper lip like a caterpillar in the throes of death. . . ohmygod. . . that's the closest I ever came to corpsing. I bit the sides of my mouth. The audience was howling. And you had like another two pages to reel off when you deftly took pause and ran a finger over the mustache, trying to press it back on."

"That's when you turned and walked upstage."

"Damn straight—it wasn't in the blocking, but I couldn't watch you struggle with your silly mustache along with that speech. That just confirms my findings."

"Yes?"

"Whenever another actor fucks up, you're the one who inevitably gets the credit."

"How's that?"

"Well, lines are the obvious crux—you give someone the wrong line, they have to make up the difference. You..."

"There you go, blaming me."

"No, sorry, I mean the hypothetical you—I'm way past your fickle

facial hair—An actor drops a line or speech, and if you're on top of it, your brain shifts into 'how am I going to work this out?' Important exposition may have been left out or whatever, but the point is, the person who fucked up probably isn't even aware of it, whereas the other is left trying to fix things and inevitably fucks up in the process of the fixing.

"I was in Hedda Gabler once, and the chick playing Hedda—this was a project, so we only performed it once, for our peers—totally went up on her lines. I was watching from the sidelines while my friend, playing Brack, stumbled through the entire show responding to Hedda, who collapsed one long expositional speech after another with 'Really, Judge? That is very interesting, then what happened?' I mean she, for whatever reason--probably because she was a lazy twentysomething who really just wanted to be a model-- hadn't bothered to learn her lines. So my friend sputtered and sweated trying to make sense of the whole, while she remained perfectly composed and lovely."

"Well, it's good we had time to reconnect. You say. . . uh, your girlfriend is going to join us?"

"Ursula, yeah, she had an audition."

"Ursula. That's an unusual name."

"Yeah, just remember, I told her you were gay."

"I'm not gay."

"Yeah, but that's what I told her—you want to make me out to be a liar?"

"Well, you fucking are."

"At least I can grow my own facial hair."

"You guys been together long?"

"Long enough for her not to leave me too long in bars with thespians of ambiguous sexuality."

"Well, it's a waste you didn't go into standup instead of straight theatre."

"Yes, well, we're still young in the game. At least I am."

"I must admit, I'm getting awfully disillusioned. I would have hoped to have been a lot further along in my career by now."

"Christ, I was only kidding."

"No, but you're right. I just turned thirty-nine, and all I have to

Larry Crist  
show for it is an apartment in Brooklyn.”

“Some actors go their whole lives homeless. Apartments are tough to come by.”

“I still don’t have any union affiliations. . . aside from a couple appearances on *One Life To Live*, I haven’t done shit in this town.”

“You have an agent, right?”

“Barely. Last time he called was for an infomercial, I would round out a panel in a Sara Lee pie Bake-Off.”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound terribly challenging.”

“No, it was like a crappy hundred bucks for a day’s work.”

“A hundred bucks is a-”

“It’s shit. It’s carfare and lunch.”

“And probably, for that gig anyway, all the pie you can eat.”

“I don’t know, I skipped the audition. I’ve begun writing screenplays instead.”

“Oh, well there’s solid, viable work.”

“The story I was working on is based in part on this cane. Did I show you this cane?”

“I couldn’t help but notice it. Is it for protection? I hadn’t noticed that you had acquired a limp.”

“Look, the head comes off, and there’s a four ounce flask. And if you unscrew the handle, you have a little sword.”

“Jesus, you stab anybody yet?”

“Of course not, but it’s a dandy letter opener, and it does give one a sense of security walking around at night.”

“If you get mugged, my money is on the mugger— Hey, Urs.” I wave, having seen her enter from across the bar, a halo of daylight behind her. She lets the door swing back. Tall, blond, fresh, Nordic, big teeth, breasts. . . a smattering of applicable adjectives. She sees us, crosses through the bar, and scoots in beside me into our booth.

“I almost didn’t recognize you,” I say, “all dressed up as such.”

“I still have my audition face on.”

“This is Robertson. Robertson, Ursula.”

“Robertson? Kind of formal military?”

“Rick.” He smiles. They exchange a quick above table handshake.

“Don’t let him fool you, he’s a total fag.”

“Ha—I’m not that good an actor.”

"True. Robertson and I acted in a bunch of crap a million years ago in California. . ."

The waiter whistles by taking Ursula's order, and leaves us another round.

"How'd it go?"

"Hard to say. I felt okay, but I got little vibe one way or the other. They said there'd be callbacks in a couple days."

"Robertson here has been on *One Life to Live*."

"Twice, but have yet to get SAG out of the deal."

"I've always been told," says Ursula, "I'm too tall for the soaps."

"She's a goddamn inch taller than me. I'm like Tom Cruise beside her."

"Oh, well," says Robertson, taking out his pipe and tapping it into a glass ashtray. "There's always work for midgets."

Ursula's drink arrives. "Would you care to see a menu?" asks our waiter.

"No," I say, "I think we're going to concentrate on drinking for a while." He leaves. "Can't believe you still have that silly pipe. . . a pipe, a cane. . . you're forever in some Molerieian/Cowardly world."

"Yes, well it was in shows like those I picked up such habits."

"I didn't mean to imply Robertson was really a fag, it's just so much easier than trying to describe what he really is."

"Lance is obsessed with fags, aren't you honey? I'm trying to up his standards."

"And that standard," says Robertson, having filled his pipe and striking a match, "appears fairly high."

"Fucker, are you flirting with my girl? You know, the only reason he's paying you any mind at all is to make me jealous. Just before you arrived he was running his hand up my thigh."

"Mmmm," says Ursula. "That smells good—what is it?"

"Something rum-soaked," says Robertson.

"I prefer," I say, "my cannabis-indica-sativa blend—unfortunately it's not the kind of mix I can whip out here."

"That reminds me," says Ursula. "There."

"Ow, what's. . ."

"You're not wearing green—it's Saint Paddy's day."

"Ah-ha, that's why this place is so busy—I'd almost forgotten."

Larry Crist

“Well, it’s a damn fine excuse,” says Robertson, “to hide out and get drunk.”

“Here, here.” We toast, clink glasses, finish, the waiter brings us another. Toast, clink, finish. . .

“So this agent I was telling you about says. . .” Robertson has shifted into gab’s high gear, “Californians are flaky—but not because we’re Californians, we’re flaky because California itself, its very geo-mass is flaky.” He pauses to sip. “New York, this agent went on to say, was built on granite. It’s solid and sound. The subway barrels through, a million billion things tunneling this way and that, and this is absorbed by granite, its energy rising up revitalizing the city. On the west coast, all that power and focus just dissipates. Instead of driven people you have people who drive. You have earthquakes that suck away the very vitality. And of course the weather is a big factor. Here there are seasons, hot, cold. . . everything distinct and specific. Out west you have sunny days in December, cold spells in July—but never too terrible. . . just kinda, whatever. . .”

“Now, imagine,” I mutter to Ursula, “listening to Robertson on stage and watching his mustache tumble from his lip.”

“That’s why we have movies, and they have theatre.”

“Because of granite?” asks Ursula.

“Because of everything—according to him—this agent. But it’s a good theory. Things are different here. People are different. They’re harder. More driven.”

“Speaking of driven, we probably should think of moving on.” says Ursula.

“We must owe a fortune.”

“And our table’s sticky,” I say, pulling out my wallet. I wave down the waiter who sees us immediately, or maybe he just sees my wallet. He brings us our bill. The bill warrants a whistle, and as I examine it I rifle through my wallet. “Jeeze, I could have sworn I had a fifty, you got any money, hon?”

“Forty to my name, but we still need to get back to Philly.”

“Robertson?”

“I have a maxed out Macy’s card and a couple twenties—but that’s all I got.”



*Rodney Gomez*

Longhorns

On the new expressway  
a row of steer  
trapped in concrete.

One of them is looking off  
to the underpass,  
his eyes mere circles  
filled with the expectation  
all simple things have,  
drooping Jerusalem thorn,  
swollen grapefruit  
ready to burst.

Another slants his horns  
at the glut of hood and fender,  
no thought but running  
in his clear head.

The last one is not  
even finished: his body  
half a slab in air,  
no eyes, no muzzle.

The face, holding  
so much of essence,  
leaves its duty  
to hooves and tail,  
becoming nothing  
in the slow dissolution  
of its potential.

*Rodney Gomez*

Red-Eared Slider

None of us can tell if it is male, female, or something else.  
We've never taken a course in herpetology.  
We feed it just the same, can't avoid the tapping of its claws,  
pour its womb out when shell can't be seen.  
If we'd bring a mate of some unknown shape it would still  
cloister itself as it does now, by the pink rotala.  
Encased, its two-eyed periscope survives on water's edge,  
its leanings as useless to breath as the fish net.  
Discarding any sense of belonging, it never knows how  
we regret being wed to our two-sided prison.

*R.S. Carlson*

Child?

I

Your brother finished  
college this year. Your  
sister plans to major in  
art. Would you be

musical? Handsome?  
Voluptuous? Certainly you  
would shine in the strong  
years when young adults

glow ripeness, strike their  
matches, and see how well  
the genes will do, and where  
chins and noses fit in the

family albums. Which assorted  
virtues and vices would grain  
your particular slab of  
the family tree?

II

Had we known enough to  
expect you, this would  
be some sharper, graver  
mourning. The retrospect

could preach to when hands  
clasp for a life or against  
it, as if we could know  
before or after birth a

*(continued on the next page)*

right time to cut or  
suffocate with a firm  
hand or with the proud  
innocence of neglect.

I contend no more than  
this: that since you came  
and went so quickly, we knew  
and tasted more our deep want.

III

The others, in turn, we  
knew to fear for as the  
stubborn tissues kept,  
then threatened each

of them in the spotted,  
anxious months of waiting.  
They somehow held to term  
despite the long losses

in family history. So when  
we hear the whispers from  
a friend who knew long  
enough to dream and grieve

the intended name of one  
shortly taken, we trace  
back the sutures of fear to  
the token we do understand.

*(continued on the next page)*

IV

On that day, we had dreamed  
so little we had not begun a  
careful calendar. There were all  
the day classes, the night

class, the atrocious graveyard  
shift, suppers to fry, all those  
stairs to the second floor  
apartment, and not much other than

a bad day for cramps, the rather  
long time she might have been  
reading in the bathroom, except that  
she came pale to the kitchen for a

long embrace that left a damp shoulder  
and a question. Then she went to the  
bedroom, closed the door and spent an  
hour on the phone with her mother.

R.S. Carlson

*R. S. Carlson*

## Waterman Canyon Succession

Onshore winds herd the nimbus  
a-tumble into the valley.

Drizzle pastes a third of all windblown leaves  
athwart commuters' windshields,

trailing two-thirds to sidewalks and streets  
for soles and radials to tread.

From the remembered mountain trail,  
your voice recalls other men's sons

chronicling storm for metaphor of trunk and branch,  
the strong and the storm-broken,

citing the routes of seed, root and leaf  
rising to green aloft over deadfalls

offering their elements  
to spores and mandibles most often unseen –

old story taking younger ears through live oak,  
black oak, cottonwood, willow, and yucca.

Then, the week after,  
the one dead too young

propels another to trekking back over borders,  
pondering. . .

till *his* footwork  
brings still others in journey

*(continued on the next page)*

She'd moved into kissing distance so I put one on her cheek. She brushed her red highlights aside with a detached little grin and twisted around to give me a real kiss. I'd never dated a girl with a tongue stud before. She pulled herself up and straddled me, wrapping her arms full around my neck and laying into me like we were back at my apartment.

"Isn't it a little public to be doing this," I said when she started on my neck. I wasn't usually shy about our physical stuff but there were people watching us. Across the terminal a fat woman waiting for a flight to Kentucky was glaring at us through her librarian glasses. She had kids too, but at least their seats were facing away from us. An older man wearing a black suit, dark sunglasses, and a mismatched navy-colored Mets cap was watching too. When I caught him looking, he opened his newspaper and used it block us out. Other people were trying not to notice, except for this foreign looking guy staring right at us with a smirk.

"You worried about Southern Comfort over there?" said Lizzy, gnawing a little on my ear.

"She's got something in her bag," I said. The woman had her arm stuffed down into her carryon and was holding something tight, "Might be a Plexi-knife. Let's hope she doesn't snap before her plane starts boarding."

"Nah, she's probably just gripping onto her copy of Ann Coulter." Lizzy said. She was looking off to the side now down the terminal but she was doing things with her hands. "Did I ever tell you about the time Jen went on vacation to Hawaii with her new boyfriend?" The foreign guy was still smiling at us. He was leaning forward on his laptop case, his longish wet-looking hair hanging over the shoulder pads of his suit. "They were totally in love and then fifteen minutes into the flight he pulled out a copy of *How to Talk to a Liberal*. Not trying to be ironic or anything, just his in-flight reading. Kind of a deal-breaker right there. But then she had to spend the whole week with him." I shuddered a little bit and shifted my legs. Lizzy smiled wider.

"At least it wasn't *Dianetics*," I said. "Hey seriously there's some weird guy looking at us, you gotta cut that out." I squeezed her hands together and tumbled her back into her seat. She pouted at me but

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when I glanced back the foreign guy gave me a nod and got up from his chair. "He's coming over here," I said.

"Ha ha, no shit?" she whispered. She sank down into the pleather seat covering and took me with her. "What's he going to do, arrest us?" He crossed to our side of the terminal with a long bouncing stride like he was happy about something and stopped in front of us with a polite little half-bow. He was about my height, clean-looking despite the euro-trash haircut, and somehow still attractive with his crooked teeth.

"Hello my friends," he said. "Do not worry, I am unarmed." He did a little turn for us with his hands up, his laptop bouncing on his chest. "You can body search if you please, sir. You speak French?" he asked.

"Not enough," I said. He seemed to think that was funny.

"*Bien*, good answer," he said. "I am Alec, and to whom do I have the pleasure...?"

"Adam. This is my girlfriend Lizzy. Nice to meet you," I said.

"I apologize for so much staring, it was inexcusable. May I sit?" he bounced on his heels and gestured at the seat across from us.

"Sure," said Lizzy after a moment. "Where are you off to?" she asked. He sat down and crossed his legs. His suit looked expensive.

"To Chicago ORD and then back to France. And you?"

"We're visiting family in Washington State," I said.

"Oh no," he laughed, "you must have been here for a long time then, yes?" Lizzy ran her fingers through her hair. "And you still have some hours to wait, I see." He looked at his watch and then glanced quickly at the guy in the Mets cap. "The least I can do is offer the beautiful lovers some drinks for my impoliteness. I have some hours myself left before take-off." He showed us his crooked teeth again.

I looked at Lizzy. She cocked her eyebrows and shrugged. "All right," I said. I didn't like how he was staring at us but I couldn't see the harm in sharing a few beers. We had at least another three hours to kill.

"*Bien*," Alec said. "There is a place, I believe..." We picked up our bags and he led us down the terminal to a bar and grill called "The Tailspin" that was lit up with a lot of blue and pink neon. The chrome stools at the bar were all occupied by uniformed marines in urban



came but there was a free booth at the far corner with high seat-backs where they wouldn't bother us. It looked like a nice spot, right up against the window. We sat down and waited for the server to arrive while Alec read the menu. Lizzy put her head on my shoulder. When the waitress came, Alec ordered three glasses of Chimay. "Nine bucks each," I whispered. Not too far away an airplane was coming in for landing, its lights popping against the night sky, wing-flaps tilted to their highest pitch and shuddering as they caught the full horizontal push of the wind. I looked back at the bar. The bartender was pouring our drinks into these ridiculous looking beer-glasses with stems and the marines were cracking jokes about it.

"I don't know why they always have to pour Chimay into those stupid goblets," I said. "Just because you want a good beer doesn't mean you have to look like a sissy when you drink it." Alec laughed. "Sorry," I said, "thanks for the beer."

"No problem," Alec said. The waitress returned with our drinks and Alec gave her a big tip. "To true love?" he said, raising his glass. Lizzy rolled her eyes.

"Here, here," she said.

"But you are in love, no?" Alec asked. I nodded. We were in love. "To true love then." We all drank our beers down in a few gulps and Alec signaled the waitress for another round. "Yes, you are in love, and in such a dangerous time!" he went on in his thick accent. "The alert level is at *orange*. Surely the Al Qaeda are swarming now." He smiled at Laura.

"Laura doesn't believe in Al Qaeda," I said, grinning. After the beer, Alec didn't seem like such a bad guy. The alcohol was mixing with the painkillers and starting to bring me up again. I put the hood of my sweatshirt up and rested my head against the window. The red and blue warning lights on the tarmac were beautiful.

"Al Qaeda is the boogiemán of the twenty-first century," Lizzy said. "The war on terror has less to do with national security than it does with keeping CNN's ratings up."

"You see what I have to deal with?" I asked Alec.

"No, no," said Alec. "It is very true. The media must always have its scandal. What could make Wolf Blitzer more money than terror? Americans love a scandal, just like the French. A pastime we share, I

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think.” He gave a miniature toast before taking another long sip from his beer-goblet. “It is the same as all of those crime stories they show, chat-room kidnaps, incest, polygamy, rapers. Who watches this? Not people like you. It is housewives, evangelicals, those types, the people who are so shocked, so scandalized. ‘How shocking!’, ‘My goodness!’, ‘Think of the children!’.” Lizzy giggled at his American impressions. “Yes,” he went on, “you see what I am talking of then. But it is all entertainment, you know. They all love a scandal. The ratings are high because these people love to watch and worry and to make judgments. Terrorism is just the newest ‘hit show.’”

“Which is why the assholes in power right now are the real terrorists,” Lizzy said, getting into it. “They just figured out that fear-mongering is good television.”

“To be honest, folks, I don’t really buy into all this postmodern, hoity-toity, pinko bullshit,” I said. “I just thought I’d put that out there. Excusay mwa, no offense, Alec.” He laughed.

“None taken, of course,” he said, “all is forgiven.” He took another big sip and grinned. Foam stuck to the corners of his mouth.

“You know, Lizzy also thinks that germs are a hoax,” I shrugged. “Nope, no germs at all.” She slapped my arm.

“Look at his eyebrows,” she said, pinching my face. “He thinks he said something clever. When was the last time you saw a germ, Alec?” Her laughter was getting a little wild.

“Never, never,” he smiled absent-mindedly, looking for the waitress.

“Are you from France originally?” I asked. Something about his accent seemed off. One of my lab partners had been from Paris and Alec sounded very different.

“No, Algeria,” he said. He stretched around the corner of the booth, trying to get the waitress’ attention.

“Oh right. Then, I guess you can relate to the current situation,” I said, gesturing toward the bar. The marines were doing shots now and making a lot of noise, probably trying to get as much down as they could before last call.

“It is a little different, maybe,” he said. He gave up on the waitress and turned back to us with a smile. “I am dying to smoke right now. Would you like to join me in the box where they put all the bad

"*Oui*, it is true," Alec laughed, regaining his good humor. "American women do not like me. And now I am going back to Paris and will never know how American women make love."

He took a hard drag from the remaining stub of his roly, pinching it between his fingers like a roach. He tried to blow the smoke out of his mouth and into his nose like they do in movies but he couldn't quite pull it off, so he just laughed the rest of it out and extinguished the cigarette in one of the standing ashtrays that lined the room. "And people here are so private about this kind of thing," he went on. "In France it is much different. That is why I watched you earlier. It is rare to find Americans so unashamed of their love." He flicked his eyes at us for a moment. "But once more I am sorry if I offended."

"Don't worry about it," Lizzy said. "Adam and I are pretty relaxed about sex. People are too uptight here." She snuggled deeper into my lap and kissed me on the neck. I could feel her stud.

"*D'accord*." Alec looked at his watch. He rolled another cigarette and lit up. "Listen," he said after a drag, "my flight is coming in not so long and the two of you are such a beautiful couple and such good company. I will perhaps never return to America or meet a pair again with so much love for each other. I want to ask you something but I fear you will think it is something different than it is. It is a strange request I know, but I will rely on the charity you show me as a foreigner who does not understand your customs so well. I want to listen to you make love." He let the smoke drift out his nose slowly, his expression neutral and almost profound.

"You mean you want to listen to us fuck." I said.

"*Oui*, if you would put it that way." He looked at each of us seriously and then leaned back against the wall and laughed. "I hope you do not think I am some kind of pervert. Such things are not so unusual in France. Here I am, I see a beautiful couple overflowing with love for one another, I wonder to myself how much passion they must have. Surely they have so much they could share it with an unlucky man such as myself with only good will and a desire to know what true love sounds like." Suddenly he was melancholy again. I glanced at Lizzy. Her forehead was tense and her lips pursed. I could hear her tongue stud playing against her front teeth. "This is too much, I know," Alec went on, "but I see your love and I think, it is a bit like

my money. I am glad for it but there is so much and I am so young. I could let some of it fly away and never worry.” Leaning forward, he opened his coat with his cigarette-hand and rooted around inside with the other. Suddenly the hand swung out in a gesture that seemed to squeeze all of life’s burdens into single fistful and throw them to the wind. Crisp green dollar bills fluttered around the chamber, hovering for what seemed like an unnaturally long span of time before drifting down to rest on the linoleum floor. Alec sank back against the wall and rubbed his eyes. One of the bills settled near my foot. It was a hundred note.

“Ha ha,” I laughed. “Ha ha ha.” I reached down across Lizzy and picked it up. I pinched into a V-shape and held it up to Alec. “Please,” he said, his hand still on his face. He waved dismissively with the cigarette. I flicked the bill onto Alec’s side of the bench.

“So you want to pay us money to hear us fuck,” I said.

“Relax, Adam,” Lizzy said, giving me a kiss on the cheek. “I don’t think it’s like that.”

“No,” Alec said, looking at the window. “No, I have made a terrible mistake. I have taken this nice evening and turned it into something awful. I thought, here is this beautiful young couple who surely enjoy the very summit of earthly love and who are not ashamed to let it be seen, but struggling under so many debts. And here I am with more finances than I can possibly put to use—over five thousand dollars with me right now. How could I not want to see such a love continue to grow and flourish? We each are blessed with something the other lacks, and so I think to myself, the smallest charity on either side would be a great gift to the other.” He wrapped his jacket more tightly around himself. “But there is no way for this to happen without it seeming like *un acte de instance*. I am sorry I brought it up.”

He stood up and brushed the stray bits of ash from his sleeves.

“You have five thousand dollars in cash?” Lizzy said. She looked up at me questioningly. Five thousand dollars was a lot of money to us.

“It would be an insult to pay you at this point,” Alec said. “Please forgive me.”

“Wait,” she said without breaking eye contact with me. “You’re right Alec, Adam and I have something very special.” I shook my

head. "Relax," she whispered to me. "It will be fun. I've been trying to seduce you all night. The money is just helping me get what I wanted anyway." She smiled and rubbed her hair against my face. Her shampoo smelled like melon and ginger and some other kind of spice. "Come on," she said. I looked out the window. Even the maintenance people were gone now. It seemed like the whole building was asleep.

"How would we do it?" I said.

"No," Alec said, "I would not have you do this unless both are happy and wanting to."

"We could just go to a bathroom," Lizzy said. "No one will be around this late. We've done it in public bathrooms before. Alec will just sit in the next stall." She laughed. "We'll try to make it quick."

"You really have five thousand dollars on hand?" I said. Alec chuckled and sat back down. He pulled out an envelope stuffed with fresh cash that still had the bank wrapper on it. He fanned the money with the edge of his thumb.

"*D'accord*, you are both happy then?" I nodded slowly. "Wonderful," Alec said, "an adventure for my American friends!" He unzipped his laptop case and fished out a copper-colored flask. "For courage," he explained. "Myself first. To the Department of Homeland Security," he toasted, and took a long pull. He handed it over to Lizzy. She poured down a shot and grimaced before passing it to me. I drank until the whiskey singed my throat and I coughed out the liquor in a great spray. When I had stopped coughing I noticed that Lizzy and Alec were both laughing hard. Lizzy was wiping the pant legs of her jeans and gasping for breath. "Not too much courage," Alec said, "you will spoil it." He leaned over and gave me one solid pat on the shoulder. I could see all his crooked teeth individually.

"Believe me," Lizzy said, her face flushed, "too much courage has never been a problem for him before." What the hell did that mean? Was she still talking about the liquor? I screwed the top back on the flask and tossed it to Alec. He had to stoop over quick to catch it. I rolled Lizzy off me and stood up.

"All right," I said, "all right, I'm ready." I tried not to stumble as I bent down to pick up the hundred dollar bills. There were eight of them. Lizzy helped me pick them up. She was very red and still giving

Levi Melnick

out little hiccups of laughter. Alec put his knee on the bench below the window and looked both ways into the terminal.

“Okay,” he said without looking back, “I give you the rest after. Shall we go?”

The closest men’s room was by the seating area for our flight so we headed in that direction. It was after 1:00AM and the terminal was very quiet. Aside from the sleeping passengers there were a few airport employees working at their respective flight kiosks, but the traffic of people and baggage had dwindled to almost nothing in the time it took us to smoke a few cigarettes and negotiate a bizarre sex contract with a complete stranger. I tried to put together the logical steps that led me to this decision.

“What are you going to do?” I asked as we started to get close to the men’s room. Lizzy and I leaned against each other as we walked with Alec slightly ahead of us.

“I’m sorry?” Alec responded.

“In the stall,” I said. Alec raised his eyebrows and turned as if he were surprised at the question.

“I will listen,” he said.

“You’re just going to listen?”

“*Oui*. Like a symphony.”

That’s fresh, I thought. The Frenchman wants to listen to us make sweet music. I had the foresight to stop Lizzy before all three of us entered the men’s room together. I told her to wait a minute or two outside somewhere and she nodded, but I don’t think she really got the point because she gave me a quick slap on the seat of my jeans as we separated. Alec and I went in to check the place out. It was empty. One of the turquoise stalls was locked from the inside but when I bent down to peep under the door there was no one in it. Alec pulled up in front of a urinal on the opposite side of the room. I looked in each bathroom stall for the cleanest one but I eventually decided on the one furthest from the door, even though it was grungier than some of the others. There was a steel hook on each wall so I hung my duffle on one of them, figuring that if someone came in they wouldn’t be able to see it. I flushed the toilet for whoever used it last and wiped down the seat with toilet paper. Across from the stalls was a water-soaked countertop with a row of sinks. Finished with the urinal

now, Alec stood front of the mirror with one of the faucets on, slicking his messy hair back. He glanced over.

"Responsible looking, no?" he joked. I shrugged. I went over to use the urinal myself while Alec inspected the stall that I had picked. "Good choice," he said. He went into the stall next to it and flushed.

The door opened and Lizzy came in with a silly expression on her face. She went right up to me where I stood at the sink and pulled me up against her hips by the pockets of my hoody. "Wait a sec," I said as she tried to wrestle me into a kiss right in front of Alec. "Save it." Alec looked away modestly.

"Okay," he said, "I go check in front one more time to make sure everything is safe. When I come back I will be quiet so you will not even notice." He wiped his hands on his jacket and smiled reassuringly at each of us before walking out. For all of his talk and money he still didn't strike me as the type of person who would really enjoy listening to another couple have sex.

When he left, Lizzy pulled me close and kissed me. "He's a creep," I whispered.

"I don't care," Lizzy whispered back. She smelled like whiskey and generic pink airport soap. She pushed me into the stall and locked it behind her. She peeled off my hoody and T-shirt and hung them on one of the hooks. I helped her take off her jeans and underwear so that she was wearing only her black-striped dress with nothing underneath. We stuffed her clothes into my duffle bag and I sat down on the cold toilet cover. I had trouble at first. Everything about the situation seemed set up to the point of being artificial, but Lizzy didn't appear to mind at all. Once we got going she even made more noise than usual, way too much noise. She kept rocking me back into the tank so that the toilet water inside splashed around and my bare back made a loud regular thump against the ceramic. Her eyes were closed and she was smiling. She moaned and slapped hard against the border between our stall and Alec's. It was like the soundtrack of a porno movie. I had tried to listen for the door so I would know when Alec came in but I must have missed it. I imagined him sitting there with his hand over his face, five thousand dollars in his jacket pocket, listening to two kids screw each other and maybe asking himself whether it was worth his money. Lizzy was sure doing her best to

see that he got what he paid for. I tried to hush her but she wouldn't listen. If anyone came in they would know immediately what was going on. I caught her hand so she would stop slapping the wall at least, but she just giggled. "Lizzy," I said. I wanted her to stop. The beer and whiskey splashed around inside me like the water in the tank. Everything was so confusing. "Lizzy, what are you—" I started to ask.

The door to the bathroom opened and I pinned Lizzy's arms to her sides. She opened her eyes wide and froze but she was still breathing hard. I heard heavy footsteps against the tile, a lot of them, like a whole group of people. They led right up to the door of our stall. Someone knocked loudly on it with a hard object. "Police," said a tense older voice, "open the door."

"I'm using the toilet," I said.

"Open the door now, sir." The cop pounded on it like he was about to bust a meth lab. "Just a second," I said. Lizzy and I stood up. I pulled up my jeans and frantically rummaged through my duffle bag for her underwear.

"Open the door now, sir," the cop yelled at us, "drop your weapon." Someone kicked hard at the lock of the door.

"All right, calm down," I said, "I'm unarmed." I unlocked the door with my shirt still halfway over my head. It swung open immediately and navy and white uniformed bodies crammed into the stall. Lizzy screamed. They seized both of my arms and hauled me out onto the floor then picked me up and shoved my face against the wall. One of them rapidly body searched me. "Hey," I shouted, "this isn't necessary." From where my head was braced against the tiles I watched them drag Lizzy out of the stall. She hadn't managed to get her bra back in place and one of the straps of her dress was hanging off her shoulder. "What the hell?" I said, "Let her put her clothes back on." I looked at Alec's stall but the door was open and it was empty. The cops cuffed both of us without allowing her to fix her bra and marched us out of the bathroom into the terminal.

Once outside, they forced us to sit down next to the water fountain with our backs to the wall. Lizzy's dress had shaken loose in the struggle and one of her breasts was almost completely exposed. With her hands cuffed she couldn't cover up so she tucked her head against her shoulder to make her hair hang in front of it. She was sobbing.



*Seth Abramson*

THE COMMONS

Before I worshipped down  
I worshipped up.  
Up were the open hands  
which were clouds, were the eyes

which were the stars that slept  
if ever I was awake,  
which could have guarded them-  
selves against me  
(but did not)  
because I knew how to reflect them  
(though they were distant)

in places  
here where they could not come to.  
Pools. Satellites. Avian  
flights. Then I wanted to make do  
with only what I had. Camping

in the desert so long taught me that  
I had everything here which was  
there. I had two great hands  
and the wisdom to lower  
my guard.

*Steve Miller*

THE FIFTH GRADE NUN

was a bad nun  
gray eyed and cruel.  
On the fifth month  
a plan came out of the blue—  
to make darts from wooden matchsticks,  
sewing needles,  
slices of toilet paper.  
Next morning,  
as she passed my desk,  
I lobbed five darts  
like shooting stars  
into the sea  
of her black habit.  
All morning they bobbed  
marking something white and sunken.

*Ka'Lena Santiago Cuevas*

My Professor Who Reads Poems

He reads poems by a poet,  
and someone said to that poet, you are poetry.  
He stops to stare through the tall, neat squares  
of windows that wallpaper the classroom  
and tells us of a moment  
he could point to and say, you are poetry.

Running,  
with his daughter whose tights match  
the stripe colors of a kite that smacks in the wind,  
and the waves of the kite's streamers  
that gives the sky its own ocean.

Yet he knows with every ticking moment  
of that moment that gave poetry its meaning,  
what he can do to press that time in his head  
is like torn pieces of nothing  
falling through his hands.

And I know,  
with every landmark I pass  
in the race to describe the moment  
when a poem has found itself,  
is a place he tells me I can't live,  
a welcome I have long outstayed.

So I cling to his words like death,  
his reading voice like prayer,  
the thuds and pauses of the words  
escaping his mouth  
like the heavy shoes of my father  
gone to work before I wake.

*(continued on the next page)*

Ka'Lena Santiago Cuevas

And listening to him  
unpack each word of the poem,  
of a moment that is placeless,  
I am insignificant as the kite  
and humble like the sky.

Musicless music.  
And I sink into the deep cavity of my chest  
as the kite leaves imprints in its ocean.

*Mandy Luo*

Sun Shower

Sitting in the coffee shop in the afternoon sun  
Voices ricochet off walls, the whoosh of whipped cream  
The music from the speakers wanders among the tables  
The smell of coffee covers up the chamomile tea  
The window frames a watercolor in motion  
Clouds behind branches drop strings in the sunlight  
A mosquito outside buzzes, pushing against the glass  
A bus spits out a solitary man before elbowing on through traffic.  
Bad news strikes the New Year like tempest  
Too much pain in the Eastern Hemisphere  
Even the City of Angels is derailed from its routine  
No one knows what is waiting ahead  
Traffic lights play with colors reflecting thoughts:  
Will the rainbow reach the unfortunate ones?

*John Samuel Tieman*  
For Her Brother

wives get the word widow, husbands  
widower, kids have orphan  
but there's no word when there's a dead sister

only your own prayer composed for the moment  
between the new wound and the opening pain  
punctuated by an amen that implodes the soul

now that you've finished your house  
you've got the tie to tell her story over  
and over to yourself, to anyone, to yourself

but if you could - the bullet out of her brain  
and back in the barrel - the gun out of her hand  
and back in the drawer -

but you can't  
so the truth will just have to do  
that and the family album, the rage and the slow letting go

Hawai'i Review

and China. She is the Director of freshman and sophomore English at McNeese State University in Louisiana, and Co-Editor of the poetry anthology *Bend Don't Shatter*. Her work has appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *ACM*, *Cattahoochee Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Baltimore Review*, and *Green Mountains Review*.

Larry Crist lives in Seattle with his wife and cat, and has been widely published in numerous journals.

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R. S. Carlson is a professor of English at Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California. He served with the US Army in Quang Tri Province, Viet Nam 1970-71. In recent years, he has traveled to Southeast Asia with various aid agencies, and has led intensive English workshops for Chinese teachers of English in Guangdong and Xinjiang provinces in China.

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Levi Melnick studied physics, English, and philosophy at UC Berkeley before enrolling in classes at UH. He spent most of his life in Hawaii but now lives and works in San Francisco.

Seth Abramson is author of *The Suburban Ecstasies* (Ghost Road Press, forthcoming 2009) and winner of the 2008 J. Howard and Barbara M.J. Wood Prize from Poetry. A graduate of Harvard Law School and a current student at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, his poems have recently appeared in *Best New Poets 2008*, *Poetry*, *New American Writing*, *Conjunctions*, *Salmagundi*, and elsewhere.

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Ka'Lena Santiago Cuevas

Ka'Lena Santiago Cuevas is a junior English Writing Major at DePauw University in Indiana. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous university publications. After graduating, she plans to pursue writing in New York City, where she is originally from, and eventually become a writing professor. She enjoys writing about her Puerto Rican and Hawaiian heritage and family. Her major influences are Flannery 'O Conner, Stuart Dybek, Raymond Carver, Junot Diaz, and poets Gwendolyn Brooks, Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Sharon Olds, and Rita Dove. She lives in O'ahu with her family.

Mandy Luo was born in 1965 in Kunming, China. She came to the US in 1991, spending three years living on the Navajo Nation—where her twins were born—before moving to Silicon Valley, where she currently resides. Ms. Luo studied Chinese language and literature in her native land and earned a MFA in creative writing from Mills College. She has had poetry and essays published in two languages, in both her motherland and adopted home. Her poetry mixes images from her travels across China with interpretations of life in the deserts of the American Southwest and observations of mainstream American culture.

John Samuel Tieman is a widely published poet and essayist. His poetry has appeared in *The Americas Review*, *The Caribbean Quarterly*, *The Iowa Review*, *River Styx* and many other journals. *The Pittsburgh Quartely On-line* publishes a collection of his poetry entitled *Morning Prayers*. In 2009, BkMk Press will publish a chapbook of his poetry. His editorials have been published in the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Des Moines Register*, *The Kansas City Star*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The National Catholic Reporter*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Star and Stripes*, in the *Star-Tribune of Minneapolis/St. Paul*, and in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* among others.



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