

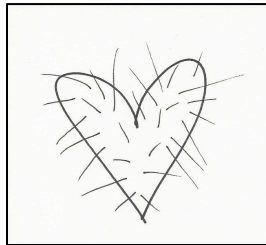


Cactus Heart

Issue #4
June 2013

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Cactus Heart Press
Northampton MA
2013

Issue #4 published June 10, 2013
by Cactus Heart Press
www.cactusheartpress.com

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Text © Cactus Heart Press, 2013
Cover photo © Cath Barton | “Women through Grasses”

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EDITOR'S NOTE

As I write this, I'm sitting in a local café, watching the rain pour down outside a big window that overlooks Main Street in Northampton. It's June, and summer is upon us, save this drizzling day, and all the umbrellas spread open against the drops coming down are making me think of circles.

Though, truth be told, on any given day I'm thinking about circles. And why not? Life is inundated with circles—the sun, coffee cup rims, eyes, rings, doorknobs, bottle tops, spare change. Number four is a circle (or, more accurately, four is a square, but what's a square other than a circle with sharp edges?), and here I am burnishing Issue #4 into existence. Another circle somewhere has fully formed.

It's been just over a year—another circle (is it obvious that I'm no linear thinker?)—since I released the first issue of *Cactus Heart*. I continue to be surprised by the learning curve of editing a literary magazine; I continue to be amazed at the quality of submissions we receive; I continue to have my heart swell a little each time I assemble an issue.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into, launching a literary magazine—but I've been wowed beyond belief, at the interest in *Cactus Heart*, and at the community of writers I've been privileged to get to know.

Here's to a few more years, and a few more circles—
Sara

P.S. This issue marks Thea Henney's joining the *Cactus Heart* team as poetry editor. I hope you enjoy her selections as much as I do—she's got an eye for fresh images, sassy voices, and elegant, unexpected lyricism.



Wetlands | Cath Barton

On Becoming a Witch

Elizabeth Schultz

She lived out in the open, on a corner,
easily accessible by email, by phone.
She placed no ads, but word got round.
She answered every caller at the door.
They came in to find her stirring the pot.
She liked to talk and share the goods.
She had an incandescence, they said,
a phosphorescence which could come in handy.
Soon she believed it, too, and now wore
everywhere a carapace which glittered green.
She swaggered about in her luminosity.
And then she started hearing rumors
that she was seen bumping people.
Shocked by her sheen, she trembled
and heard night knocking in her carapace.

Dollar Advice

Jen Hinst-White

Generally, I go for tradition—when I got married I wanted to take my husband’s name, which is Sault, Lee Sault. But my maiden name was Summer Nolan. I’m sure you can see the problem. I am not cute and never wanted to be. I never even liked Summer on its own. So I took my mother’s maiden name, Shea, as my first name, and swapped my old surname for Lee’s. Shea Sault. This is a brief, judicious name, and I like it. Lee likes it, too, although he slips up half the time and calls me by my old one.

Lee will never need that kind of fresh start; each day is new, a buffet of the bizarre. He’s a fourth-grade teacher, and he has a fourth-grader’s curiosity. In April, he biked thirty miles to climb aboard a whaling ship that had been restored as a floating museum. This was a reconnaissance mission for a possible class field trip. While on line to buy his ticket, he struck up a conversation with a man dressed as a female cheerleader, complete with blond wig and blush. Lee mentioned that he was about to get married and

was looking for a place to live. The cheerleader said that he was about to move out of his apartment, because his landlord was selling the place, and the new landlord seemed judgmental. This encounter led to our first home: an apartment in the very town we'd been scouting, for the low rent we'd never believed we could find. Even though it's a basement apartment, it crops out of the side of a hill, so we have a huge front window facing the street and light that bleaches our living room bright as heaven every morning. Things like this happen to Lee all the time.

Life with Lee is not all whimsy. I'll wake to find him staring at the ceiling at two in the morning, vexed by a conversation he's had, convinced that he's accidentally insulted someone. He worries about coincidences—what they mean, whether he's missed an important cosmic instruction. He wonders if he'll wake up in the afterlife to find some missed assignment, some red X, on the report card of his life. I don't understand this, and I don't know what to attribute it to. It's hard to see him in this kind of distress. He also worries that I'll get irritated with his worrying, though I deny it again and again. "I'm not annoyed," I tell him. "I'm concerned." But he doesn't believe me.

I hold out hope that when we've been married a few more years, he will settle in comfortably with the fact that I will never leave him, no matter what crazy thing is tormenting him. I'm certain I won't.

About a week ago, I came out of the bedroom at six in the morning to find Lee spying out the big front window with sweat rolling down the back of his neck. His shirt clung to his shoulder blades. His morning bike rides sometimes calm him down, if he's in a bad stretch, but not that day.

"He did it again," Lee said. I love the charcoal dust of his morning stubble. I love his widow's peak and his thick-rimmed, boxy glasses, which remind me of a 1950s newscaster.

"The guy across the street?"

"I saw him. This is the third week in a row. He walked across and put two trash bags in our garbage can."

"Maybe he just doesn't have enough room in his can."

"We're going to get maggots," he said.

"Why don't you go talk to him? Just ask him not to do it anymore."

“I want to watch him a little longer,” Lee said. “I think he has bad motives.” We stared at each other. I started laughing. Then he did too, sort of. Half of him doesn’t exactly believe in what he is saying, and has a sense of humor about it. The other half keeps on knitting the story.

“Uh,” I said. “What kind of motives?”

“I’m just saying,” Lee said, “a guy who puts his trash in someone else’s can might be ashamed of his trash. Let’s say—I don’t know—he was illegally breeding dogs. And now he’s drowning puppies and throwing them away bit by bit, in our can.”

“God!” I said. “Stop it.”

“Okay, fine,” he said. “So maybe he has this huge porn collection and now he’s tossing it. What if the can gets knocked over and there’s porn all over our driveway? What if it’s kiddie porn? And not only do we get evicted, but I lose my teaching job?”

“Lee.”

“Or what if he’s a drug dealer? People are always coming and going at his house. All those cars that park over there at night?”

“But the cars all come at once,” I said. “People don’t buy drugs like that. Like Tupperware parties.” I walked up

to stroke his hair, the strands damp under my fingertips. “You have no evidence,” I said, “that he’s doing anything illegal.”

“What about the cars that keep stopping in front of *our* house?” he said. “They could be undercover cops. Maybe they already know what’s in the bags. I mean, those cars—what are they doing?”

“That *was* weird,” I said. “But it was only twice.” The first time he told me it happened, I dismissed it. But then I saw it for myself. A sedan came to a rolling stop in front of our apartment, the driver took out a camera, snapped a photo, and then drove away. It took all of fifteen seconds. Lee said that the first time, it was a silver SUV. “If I see it again,” I said, “I’m going to run out and ask them who they are.”

Lee looked to the side, implying that this might not be wise. Again, half-joking. I’m pretty sure.

We showered together, nuzzling under the spray, and went off to our jobs. I used to be a teacher, too—tenth-grade social studies. I had my own classroom for one year before the district budget got voted down, we went on

austerity, and some of us got the axe. That was last year. I was 24; I didn't have tenure.

Lee is in a different district, and they're doing all right, so I don't worry too much. I was beginning to wonder, anyway, if I was wired for teaching. When the kids got out of control, I was never good at getting them to settle down. Sometimes I wanted to tell them: "If you don't want to learn, what can I really say to convince you?" I'll go back to it if I get the call—I'm on a list somewhere—but in the meantime, I'm working at the florist shop where I worked in college. Lee's been having fun helping me think of other things I could do. His imagination doesn't give him only grief.

On the way to work, I stopped at the deli to buy a cup of coffee, and gave the woman at the counter two singles. She was about to put them in the register, and then she stopped. She held up one of the bills. "Did you do this?"

I looked at the dollar. In bright orange ink, someone had stamped a talk bubble coming out of George Washington's mouth.

"Not me," I said.

“No, but I mean, did you *do* it?” she said. “Did you check out the website?”

In the bubble were these words: “Ask George! Free wisdom at DollarAdvice.com.”

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t even notice it.”

“You’ve got to do it!” the woman said. “Do you have another dollar you can swap me?”

I looked in my wallet. All I had now was a twenty. “Maybe I can just write down the serial number,” I said. People were coming in behind me. A toddler began to whine.

“It’s not the same if you don’t have it in your hand,” the woman said. “You’ve got to do it. Here, I’ll give you change.” She started counting singles out of her tip jar. I waited, shifting from sneaker to sneaker. I took the bills from her, gave her my twenty.

“Promise me you’ll come back,” she said, “and tell me what it said.”

That afternoon, Lee called me at the flower shop. I was wrapping a calla lily bridal bouquet with floral tape—which, by the way, is not sticky until you stretch it. Even then, it mostly sticks to itself. Isn’t that odd?

“Summer—”

“Shea,” I said.

“I got home from work and as soon as I took off my tie, it happened again. A guy took a picture and drove away.”

“What kind of car this time?”

“White Crown Victoria.”

I’ve noticed that cops do use Crown Vics for unmarked cars. I was pretty sure this wasn’t lost on Lee, but I didn’t mention it, just in case.

“Are you anxious?”

He didn’t say anything. Then he said, “I think I’m going to fix that kitchen drawer that doesn’t open right. Then we can get to all the stuff in the back. Don’t cops use Crown Vics for—”

“Love you,” I said, and hung up before he could finish.

When I got home, the contents of the junk drawer were on the floor, and Lee was worrying the screws out of the rails. It surprised me to see it all scattered on the linoleum—just three months of marriage, and we already had a junk drawer, with rubber bands and receipts and pencil stubs and everything.

I told him about the dollar bill with the website, the lady at the counter who wanted me to do it.

He liked that. “Maybe it’ll give us advice on the garbage guy.”

“Maybe it’ll give me career advice,” I said.

We opened his laptop on the kitchen table, and went to DollarAdvice.com.

“We made this website because we like advice. We even like advice from strangers. Sometimes it gives us a fresh perspective on problems we’ve been stuck on for weeks or months.

“So we got to thinking: What about advice from people who don’t even know your specific problem? A grandmother in Arizona might have words of wisdom for a teenager in Maine. What would be a good way to transmit this advice across social and geographical lines? A dollar bill can travel hundreds of miles in a matter of days.

“To give and receive your advice, enter the serial number of your dollar bill, along with your zip code, below. Enter a piece of advice for the next person. When you click ‘Submit,’ you will receive a piece of advice from the last person who spent your dollar and checked out DollarAdvice.com.”

“People are amazing,” I said. What I meant was “nuts,” but Lee looked so happy that I tried to keep it positive.

“I love this idea,” he said.

We followed the directions, put in the serial number and everything else, then came to the empty text box. “What advice should I give the next person?” I said.

I looked at Lee, and saw he was trying to come up with something significant and deep. So I typed “Get regular exercise, and eat five servings a day of fruits and vegetables.” And I clicked Submit.

The site spun along for a moment, and then replied: “The latest advice-giver to spend your dollar lives in BILLINGS, MONTANA, and logged into this website 17 DAYS AGO.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“Scroll down,” Lee said.

I did. And the screen said: “Your advice: YOU SHOULD ADOPT A STRAY CAT OR DOG.” It was even worse than my advice. I had been hoping for something with a little more muscle.

“Very sweet,” I told Lee. “Probably from an animal shelter worker.”

But Lee put his hands over his eyes and leaned back in the kitchen chair. “You’re not going to believe me, I know you’re not,” he said. “But you know Paul, the custodian at

school? He was feeding this cat scraps from the cafeteria, and it climbed into the bed of his pickup and had kittens. He took care of them for a couple months, and today he brought them in and was giving them to teachers and staff. He tried to get me to take one.” He stared at the wall, at a woven Mexican rug we bought on our honeymoon. “What does it mean?”

I wished I could go back in time. I would have made the cashier take that dollar.

“Sometimes things are just random,” I said. “You’re trying to make a story where there isn’t one.”

I thought I was being his calmer, his comforter—Shea butter, he calls me—balm, thick and creamy. “You’re my mashed potatoes in winter,” he says sometimes. From Lee’s face, I could see I was failing. How would Lee put it? I was not mashed potatoes. I was juice on a bitten tongue.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” I said. We had about an hour of good daylight left. He shook his head.

Fine—let him work on the drawer some more. He was deep into his head now. I reached under the table for my sneakers.

“Shea,” he said. He pointed out the window. A black minivan was rolling to a stop in front of our house.

I scrambled for my shoes, started to lace them, decided there wasn't time. The camera flash flared white as I reached the front door. By the time I got to the end of the driveway, the minivan had turned the corner. I considered chasing it, but my sneakers were still untied. I turned around to see Lee in our doorway, looking a little less sad, a little more—what?

I was the one who lay awake that night. I watched the headlights of passing cars slide across our bedroom wall, and the red sting of the numbers on our digital clock. I listened to Lee snoring. I hoped—I still hope, as I recall this—never to turn out like my grandmother, losing the gift of deep sleep as I get older, moving into a separate bedroom. I like the snoring. It means he's here.

I had hurt his feelings, and I didn't like that. But what else could I do? Join his worrying? Make up stories along with him—try to find new connections, but good ones, benevolent ones? My mind doesn't work like that. I think things happen, millions of unrelated things every day, and sometimes, gifted people like Lee can tell stories that bring them together. And sometimes the stories are so convincing that two people find themselves with—say—a

wonderful, cheap apartment, because they suspended disbelief sufficiently, for a short time, to follow an invisible dotted line from point A to point B. But do I believe the line was already there, and Lee somehow had the eyes to see it swooping in space, and I didn't? No. Lee doesn't detect the line; he draws it.

Or does he? What could I say about these cars pulling up in front of our house? Now I had seen them. What could I say about an offer to adopt a stray cat, a few hours before the advice came from hundreds of miles away?

But this could yank my mind beyond its breaking point. Soon I'd be seeing saints in oatmeal. I rolled onto my other side, flipped my pillow to find a cool patch. I decided that the question could not, must not be: Do I believe Lee? Do I take his fantasies seriously? The question was, and is, instead: How do I love Lee? How do I take Lee seriously?

I had the next day off from work. Still in my pajamas, I kissed my husband goodbye and watched his old Saturn back out of the driveway. Then I settled into the recliner with a mug of black coffee to watch the street. It was seven o'clock.

Mostly, I wanted to see the street as Lee sees it. I like our living room so much—the morning light, the green-tea walls, my collection of skeleton keys hung in a grid above the TV—that I don't look outside a whole lot. So this morning I sat and watched. It rained for a bit, then stopped. Sparrows nipped from ground to tree. Cars passed. I got bored. But just after nine, the guy across the street peeked out his front door.

After staring at our driveway for a moment, he came outside, carrying a department-store plastic bag. He walked over to our recycling can, put out for the day's collection, and dumped in about a dozen colored glass jars. Then he covered them up with our milk cartons and beer bottles.

I sat staring. Was this it? Should I run out and start asking questions? I was wearing secondhand yoga pants, a camisole. I couldn't confront the guy like this. I looked like a lingerie ad from a discount store.

Except then, as the door slammed behind him, a black Jaguar pulled up in front of our house. A *Jaguar*. The driver lifted a camera. I jumped into Lee's size-11 sneakers and bolted out to the driveway, every bit of me bouncing, the shoes clapping on the asphalt. As the camera whirled, I

knew the driver had caught me in his photo, and I didn't care.

He rolled up his window and began to pull away. I ran after him. "Hey!" I yelled. "Hold on! Stop! Stop!"

What do you think? He stopped. And rolled the window back down.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said. I saw his eyes dart to my nipples. I crossed my arms. "People have been taking photos of this house lately. Why is that?"

He looked at the camera in his lap, and then at me. "I'm a real estate agent," he said. "I'm working up comps."

"And that means what?"

"My client wants to buy or sell a house in the neighborhood, I put together a handout with a bunch of comparable properties—houses that sold recently, houses still on the market. Photos, selling price, how many bedrooms, blah blah blah. I needed a picture. So."

"Wasn't there a photo online already?"

"They clear them off within a week of the sale, to keep the inventory updated. Are we done?"

"I guess so," I said. "My husband and I were just wondering."

When Lee got home from work, he put two large shopping bags next to the door and covered my face with kisses.

“Wait till you hear what I found out,” he said. “It’s starting to make sense.”

“Wait till *you* hear what *I* found out. I chased down one of those cars today.”

When I finished the story, I expected Lee to look relieved, or embarrassed, or something. But he only settled back into the couch and said, “It doesn’t matter. Paul’s going to be here in a minute.”

“The cat guy? What for?” But I knew. I got up and looked in the shopping bags. One had a bag of kitten food, and the other a litter box.

“We should have talked about this,” I said.

“When you hear what he has to say,” Lee said, “you’ll see why this all happened. There was a reason you got that dollar advice. It turned out I *needed* to talk to Paul.” He paused, making sure I understood, and pressed down on every word of the next thing he said. “*He knows. The guy. Across. The street.*”

“I don’t even want to hear it,” I said. “I don’t understand you. You’re frantic that our neighbor’s garbage

is going to get us evicted, but then you go and do something that really could get us in trouble. What are you going to do if the landlord says no pets?”

A blip of a horn, and we both looked to the street. Out of a Japanese compact hatchback, bluer than beach glass, climbed Paul the custodian.

I realized now that I had never met him. I would have remembered. He looked like a Viking in cut-offs. Tattooed legs grew like redwood trunks from dull black boots. His ruddy beard was so large, so nest-like, that he could have hidden the kitten in it. But he was holding a shoebox to his chest.

“Hey,” Paul said, as he ducked in our door. The kitten was mewling through the holes in the lid of the shoebox. “Nice to meet you, Shea.” He gave me a paddle-sized hand.

“Soda?” I said. “Coffee?”

“Beer?” Lee added. “Stay a while.”

“Got anything dark?” Paul said. Then he sat down in the armchair and put the shoebox on the coffee table. “She might have a couple of fleas,” he said.

Lee brought Paul a Guinness and opened the box. “Look at you!” he said. “You’re a cow cat!” It was true: the kitten was chalk-and-asphalt, a furry runty Holstein. Lee

lifted her up and looked into her face. She mewled some more. She smelled like cat piss, and I saw a flea by her ear. “What’s with her eye?”

“She was born like that,” Paul said, taking a swig of the Guinness. “But she gets around okay.”

I went over to look. One of her pupils was a normal cat-slit, but the other was rounded open at the bottom, as if formed around a sunflower seed. “Nobody else wanted her,” Paul said. “Watch this.” He took the cat from Lee and perched her up on his shoulder. The side of his neck was tattooed with a chunky anchor. The kitten pressed itself up against his neck, at the edge of his beard, and began to suckle and knead the tattooed skin. Paul winced and took one of her paws in his fingers to hold back her claws. I knew Lee was charmed. “She’s the only one of the litter who does that. I was kind of happy when no one wanted to take her.”

“It’s not too late,” I said. “You can still keep her.”

“My girlfriend’s allergic,” Paul said. “She’s freaking out. I have 24 hours before she takes her to a shelter.”

Lee didn’t look at me. He knew he was keeping the cat. And why not, right? Who cared if we get kicked out of our apartment? Because surely a new one would drop into our

laps at the eleventh hour; surely, Lee would be sneaker shopping and meet a couple of ballet dancers, about to go on tour in Asia, who needed a house sitter for the next year.

Not even Lee could survive on Lee logic forever. I wondered if our marriage could. And yet our marriage *had* to survive. I had decided when I was ten years old, watching the wreckage of my friends' families, that I would never get divorced, not ever; I felt and still feel very strongly about this. More than that, I feel very strongly about *Lee*. But something here had to yield.

I felt the floor vibrating beneath my bare feet, and looked over to see Paul jiggling his knee. He was looking at me. I should have saved my thinking for later. *Your face has no curtains*, Lee sometimes says.

Paul cleared his throat. "Crazy to be back in this neighborhood," he said. "I haven't been here in, I don't know, a year maybe."

"Right," I said. "You know our neighbor?"

"Dude, it's so crazy," Paul said. "Across the street? That's Kurt, my brother-in-law. My ex-brother-in-law. When Lee told me your address, I was like, you're messing with me. I used to come here every week for poker. I loved

that guy.” He took a long slug of the beer. “Do you ever talk to him?”

Lee and I looked at each other. “We see him in passing,” I said.

“What’s he like?” my husband said. “What is he into?”

“Like, what does he do for a living?” Paul said. “He’s an office manager.”

“Does he have any hobbies?”

“Well, poker night, a few times a week,” Paul said. “He’s got a couple of dogs. He spends a lot of time emailing my sister. He was sending her so many emails that she was worried he was going to start stalking her or something. So she got a new address and made me watch the old one. I don’t think he’d threaten her. He’s a softie, that guy.”

“You really read the emails?” I said.

“I used to, but they got boring,” Paul said. “*I need you, my heart is eating itself*, moo moo moo. I haven’t checked it in six months. Can I get another beer?”

Lee got it for him. The kitten scaled Paul’s leg, and he barked in pain, but he rubbed her ears between his fingers. Then he stood and said, “What the hell. I’m going over there.”

“What are you going to do?” I said.

“I just want to say hi,” Paul said. “You know, you think you have a brotherly bond with a guy. And then...and then.” He picked the kitten off his shorts and set her on Lee’s shoulder. “I’ll be back.”

“Wait,” I said. “Can you ask him why he’s been putting his garbage in our trash can?”

We watched Paul jog across the street, Guinness in hand, and knock on the door. Our garbage-sneaking neighbor opened up. Lee and I watched, crouching low on the couch, though Paul’s shoulder blocked the guy’s face. Finally he let Paul in.

“Imagine they reconcile,” Lee said. “Or at least have one last conversation. Wouldn’t you say it was all for a reason?”

I opened my mouth. I had words queued up. And then I thought of what it had felt like, seeing Lee’s face last night, when I told him *Sometimes things are just random*, and sucked all the hope and meaning out of Dollar Advice. So I stopped. Inside me the words whipped by, like graffiti on the side of a subway car:

You want me to believe
that your paranoia about a weird neighbor,

and real estate agents driving by,
and a dollar I got who knows where,
and a pushy lady at the deli,
and a website set up by two flaky grad students,
and a cat depositing her brood in the nearest pickup
truck—

that all these things lined up
as part of some preordained plan
to comfort the heart of a custodian who loved his
brother-in-law?

What good could come of saying these things?
Somehow I could hear Lee pleading: Why not? Why
shouldn't they? Why shouldn't the details of the world fit
together sometimes, like a glorious mousetrap, for love?

I want this to be true—who doesn't?—but all the same
it was too much, too much for me. Saints in oatmeal. I
looked at Lee, who was stroking the scraggly creature on
his shoulder, watching my face, and I hoped my thoughts
had clattered by so fast that he couldn't read them.

But then, another thought—the question I'd settled on
last night. How do I love Lee? How do I take Lee
seriously?

I reached for the cat. He handed her to me. I looked at her slit eye, and her sunflower seed eye, and then at Lee. “I think you’re the kindest person I know,” I said. “With all the torture that guy put you through, you still want him to reconcile with Paul.”

Lee’s shoulders relaxed. The cat escaped me and took a flying leap at his hands. A flea bit my wrist.

“You do want to keep her,” he said.

“You have to talk to the landlord. I’m not doing it.”

“That’s fair,” Lee said.

We made a pizza—an extra-large one, in case Paul came back—but an hour, two hours passed, and the door across the street didn’t open. We changed into sweats and stayed up until midnight, watching movies, and still, Paul didn’t come back.

“I hope he didn’t kill our neighbor,” I said. We took a last look out the front window. His car was still there.

“I don’t think he’d do that,” Lee said.

The next morning, when Lee got back from his bike ride, Paul was loading his hatchback with garbage bags. I came out in my bathrobe to see what was going on.

“Kurt says he’s sorry about the garbage,” Paul said. “It’s my sister’s stuff. He emailed her last month and told her if she didn’t come by and tell him why she’d left, he was going to start throwing all her things away.”

“In our can?”

“Well, he figures... If she can just drive by and pull it out of his garbage, his plan doesn’t work. He didn’t think she’d look in yours.”

“And you still don’t think he’s a stalker?” I said.

“You got to understand,” Paul said, “she really did flat-out leave him. A person deserves a reason. I could understand if he was hitting her or something. That’s just evil, no excuse for that. But he wasn’t. She just got sick of him.”

“So now you’re taking it all home for her?”

“She’s still my sister,” Paul said, and tossed another two bags in the hatchback. “Around 3 a.m. he agreed it was a better plan.”

“I’ll see you at work,” Lee said. “I’ve got to go shower.”

Paul slammed the hatchback shut. “I’m coming back for poker on Thursday. You should come.” He yawned, and scratched his beard with both hands. “Damn, it’s good to see that guy again.”

We showered together, Lee and I, and I drove him to work. I wasn't due at my job for two hours, but—I don't know. I don't know. I just wanted to.



Send Me A Signal | Martha Clarkson

Practice.

Logen Cure

You fought the urge to stop at the edge of the light.

 Didn't want to seem chicken—
teammates had vanished into the dense dark of the desert
 after a soccer ball countless times—
 they always made it back.

The first footfall that crunched
 mesquite branches under cleats slowed you to a jog.
You glanced back, reassured of the humming dome of light
 enveloping the field, the shrinking figures of the other girls.

A noise like paper shuffling made you reckon the ball hit a yucca.
You guessed at how far out, stood still,
 squinted into the low, spiky shadows, and listened
for the coyote calls that always gave the family dog that grave look.
You remembered the day mother
 crushed an egg-bearing scorpion in her formal living room,
 the exodus of tarantulas across highways before rain.
 You prayed.

Relief swelled into your throat
 as you spotted the ball, seized it, and fled.
From the safety of the field, you faced the black expanse,
 ground indistinguishable from sky, stars and oil rigs twinkling.

Shade of the Eclipse

Jon Svec

Grenades are pitched; underhanded, upwards. They pop in the air. Bullets whiz in a constant stream, giving the air between us the impression of thickness. Your back is to it, you don't seem to notice. Your name chokes in my throat, and when it finally comes out it is swallowed by the flames that have risen from the scorched earth. It does not reach your ears. I imagine a move towards you. The proper muscles twitch, my foot lands exactly where I want it to, but I feel nothing underneath it. Things slip, dart and jut in the wrong direction, and I drift, akimbo, towards the ground.

I awake to the roof of the car knocking at my temples as we ride roughshod over the molten terrain. Your eyes are trained on the path, the superlative portrait of concentration, and you don't seem to notice me. I survey our surroundings. A snowfall had silently draped the landscape overnight, void of preference or prejudice, it covered everything. Stalks of various sizes protrude from underneath, each facing a different direction. They remind

us of summers passed, hint at a future. The frozen bits of dirt crumble under our tires as we move.

Bombs are dropped. I can see the echo of the latest blast in the rear-view mirror. A cloud grows above the city like a fungus. We make good time piloting over frozen fields and unkempt roads. Eventually our stomachs announce audibly that it is time to eat. We pull into a small, lit diner. I hold the front door open for you, and we enter without a word.

Inside, the chatter is fervent but commonplace. Weather and the latest scores. Dialogues meld together as if the small worn tables have been positioned to form a circle. Words from one spot in the room travel and bounce off the walls until they are redirected into another conversation. Questions are answered this way, small talk carries itself forward, a comfortable symmetry is produced. We sit at the counter, order the special. I sip my coffee in silence.

We exit just as the armored trucks pull up. Burly men dismount, boots matching pants matching shirt and hat. We hurry our pace, jump into the car, and get back on the road. They don't even notice us. They enter the diner in single file, the penultimate one sharing a laugh with the one

in back. He slaps him on the shoulder, shakes his head, walks inside with a smile still wide across his face.

We are a safe distance away when we see the blink of the blast. It is followed, seconds later, by the sounds of things breaking, mostly glass and bricks and mortar. The smell never gets to us, we are upwind, but I imagine it as a field of burning rubber tires, or toast that has been left in the heat for too long. Then I remember the faces in the diner, the gabby patrons and the waitresses, and I know that the smell must be something different entirely.

We cover more ground. Hours pass. Later, you turn and look at me lucidly for the first time since this entire mess began. You motion as if to speak, but then your lips purse and your eyes return to the road. I stay silent, too. There isn't much to say.

Our eyes droop. A neon light shines in the distance, announcing vacancy. You flick on the turn signal, ease us into the scattered parking lot, and we walk, empty handed, into the lobby. A cheery smile awaits us at the desk, the appropriate information is exchanged. Various occupants make their way through the room. No one speaks of the destruction, no one mentions the charred buildings or the

people bleeding dead in the street. She hands us the room key and bids us goodnight.

You sit on the edge of the bed, and I can see your muscles finally relax. Your jaw unwinds, your shoulders loosen and return to their proper positions. Even your toes grow limp as you release a large sigh. What are we going to do now? you ask. I really don't know.

We clutch each other in sleep but awake in the middle of the night. The thunderous booms, off in the distance, are moving closer. We rouse ourselves and make our way downstairs. The lobby is completely empty, save for the lone receptionist still smiling behind the desk. She acts as if nothing is happening. We rush to the car and continue moving while everyone else is fast asleep.

It starts slowly, almost imperceptibly. A little bit of water, as if the snow is merely melting. Then the puddles grow in frequency and in depth. Our tires kick up the water, splash it over the sides of the road. A slight hydroplane and you lose control, briefly, before straightening out again. Then the entire road is a raging river, smashing at our sides, threatening to overtake. The car floods and becomes useless. We crawl out through the

windows, make our way to slightly higher ground, and continue on our way.

The water rises so high that we are forced to swim. We vary the strokes to avoid fatigue, and eventually make it to the nearest city where the streets bathe underwater and the fires no longer burn. We approach an office building and enter through a third story window. Searching the place for signs of life, we eventually find everyone huddled in a single conference room. We enter with pleas and questions, but are quieted and asked to leave. They are in the middle of a meeting.

We head back out into it. All of a sudden the current shifts, forks between us, and we are pulled in opposite directions. I struggle against it, I see you struggling too, but it is futile. You twist and drift out of sight. I focus my eyes forward and attempt to grab hold of something permanent. I steady myself and steer towards the next one I see. Once inside I search every room until I find a receptionist sitting quietly at her desk, her ear pressed into a phone. I shout, wave my arms wildly to express my urgency. She gives me a stern look and places a finger over her red mouth. Covering the receiver with her hand she leans forward, asks me to please take a seat, tells me she'll be with me in a minute.

Superhero

Barbara Fletcher

Usually she moves along the street unnoticed. Gradients of grey and ghostliness. Along the pavement, square by square, her soft-soled shoes are soundless.

You won't hear her coming. You won't see her going. A murmur unheard.

But she is there. Watching the cars line up at traffic lights, curls of smoke dissolving upward into the cold air. Watching the bright-colored bikes rush past, watching strollers roll along with fat laughing children. Watching the flicker of black-coated shoppers in and out of the coffee shop. Frame by frame.

She has her own movie planned. Sometimes all you need is a red cape.

Raccoon's Request

Ellen Webre

In the dark beneath your house, there
is a scuttling, scuttling sound, of scrabbling
hands clawing on your basement floor.
You don't hear me in the day, you can't see
me in the night, but you know I am there,
waiting in my little hole behind the water
heater. All I want is to be petted, all I need
is what you discard. Save me some leftovers,
pretty please? If you do, I might decide to
not scratch scratch scratch on your basement
door when the clock strikes midnight and
you're all by yourself. We could be friends,
you know. If you'd just let me in. I could
protect you. There's no need to be so, so
suspicious. I live here too. I've lived here
longer than you. I was here when the
previous owners died. They couldn't handle
me. But you can. You are young, and oh so
special. Surely you aren't afraid. Look
at how cute I am. Just open the door, let me
in. Come on, you can do it. I can smell you
right outside the door. I can hear you breathe.
All you have to do is turn the knob. One.
Two. What are you doing with that shovel?

In Passing Brass Onion

Graham Tugwell

Save for the house the hillside is bare, no more than a rising crest of grass, a body of land devoid of hedge or tree, unquartered by wall or fence. It stands as if a hand has swept all else away, putting down the house in perfect place, saying:

This House Goes Here.

The building is old; white wood and plaster, brittle and dry, a thing of elderly bones, surely waiting for wind to come and shake it down for good. But it has stood for an age and will stand for more.

The roof of slate is soft blue-grey, sinking in the middle, slack between chimneys of rough red brick. Both front and back facades are cut with high windows, thin and tight together. Beneath the roiling grey ink sky they are plates of blackest ice.

No one can see what the house keeps inside.

The door upon the veranda is narrow and high, set with two slants of black glass and the flash of silver a letterbox. On either side of the door empty hanging baskets twist on

rusting chains, while a bench runs the front of the house,
back cracked and seat collapsed.

The house stands, wood defying the death of itself, and
looks down on the town.

Quiet dismissal.

All it could ever want it holds within its walls.

This is a cold, wet day.

Color is dulled and pushed to the edges of the world.

Make way for the white and grey!

Make way for wind and the colors of mud!

Let them pass, let the day entire pass.

She is the only point of life. The day can dim her
color—dark navy jeans, rust and burgundy woollen
jumper—but nothing can diminish her. The front door
comes open with a clatter and she is a bounce down the
steps, taking two at a time, all grin and flounce of tangled
mane—

Look at her.

Make her an image.

Make her a memory to keep—

Freckles across the button nose that bring her lips into a
bow, full and parting soft. Her eyes are sterling-silver blue

until, with smile or laughter, they are made a shining black. Front teeth, large and square, that fit the round of her face exactly. A chin, delicately cleft. Hair long and straight, lighter as it runs from root to tip, ending unruly brown-blond in the small of her back. A slim body; that stretched and skinny gracelessness of a childhood steadily left behind.

Her name is Clare.

Three hours ago she turned fourteen.

She jumps from the last step laughing, landing unsteady with the beetle-crunch of gravel. Her uncle Martin is waiting for her—thin, fresh-faced, his hands in pockets, he leans against the body of a car made coffee-colored by rust. He turns to take the full force of her hug—it reels him back a brace of steps.

“Okay,” he laughs, “Okay!” and sets her back upon the stones. “Happy 14th” and a kiss for her forehead.

“Did you get me a present?” she asks with a grin.

He winks. “Now *that* would be telling wouldn’t it?” Looking up at black blank windows his smile becomes a static thing. “Are your folks about?”

A peeved breath blows through her pursed lips. “They are. But they say I’ve to go with you for a couple of hours. I have to...” (and here she assumes the sharp voice and

bulbous eyes of her mother) “...keep myself *out* of their hair! You *hear* me, little miss?” Eyes flashing dark, voice low through her smile. “Are they setting up my party? Is that what they’re doing?”

He grins conspiratorial. “Something like that,” he says.

She squeals and claps her hands, “Ooh, I can’t *wait!*”

“Well come on,” he says and leads her across the gravel. She locks an arm with his and begins to tell him about her day. He laughs at her jokes, nods his head at anecdotes. Wind-whipped figures, stark against the width of a sky cracked in masses of black and white. He takes her round the side of the house, away from the driveway, off the path.

Her grip tightens. “Give me a clue, Martin?”

“Ah, that would spoil it.”

“You can *tell* me.”

“I can’t.”

“Well let me guess—” and before he can stop her—
“Can you wear it? Can you... eat it? Is it something I’ve always wanted? Or is it a surprise?”

He sighs a little good-natured sigh. “Clare. You won’t guess. Save your breath.”

“But it *is* a present?”

“You... could call it that,” and his cryptic grin draws a sour look from her. She is quiet in her contemplation; it takes a minute for her to notice they are at the back of the house—a lean-to shed, a scrubby lawn, the slope almost vertical down to the valley between hills. “Out here?” she says, a little uncertainty in her grin, “My present is in the backyard?”

“No,” he laughs and they enter the house. The hinge proclaims, empty rooms echo with the sound of feet. She adds her voice to the noise: “Mam? Dad?”

Girl and man move through the kitchen, reflected clear on chrome, moving as color over marble flats. In soaplight seep down the hallway she turns a circle and calls again. “Where are they Martin?” she asks.

He presses a finger against his lips. “Don’t worry. All’s grand.” He crosses to a tall and heavy cabinet of dull cream wood set up against the wall. He puts his shoulder against one side—a little push, a little movement. “We have to do this very quietly.”

The bow of her lips make a doubtful hole and she crosses her arms on her chest. “You’re being odd.”

He shakes his head. “Help me move this.”

She makes no move.

“Clare...”

Hesitant, she comes and grips the furniture. Slowly, they inch the cabinet away from the wall—the rock of crockery forward, a shudder of white and blue, almost a topple and tip—he lets out a breath through grimacing teeth as plates jostle and knock and settle at last.

Long, long, such a long high breath...

“Close one that,” he whispers and they share a smile of disaster averted.

With care they drag the cabinet out the rest of the way.

Revealing...

Thin black gap in the white wooden wall, a tunnel deep into the heart of the house. A breath comes through; dead air, the last of its strength spent in escaping, the high damp smell of unloved space.

She peers into the gap. “It’s... it’s in there?” Thinking: *Dust and spiders.* Thinking: *Hidden bodies. Bones in walls.*

His voice startles. “You go on before me.”

No movement from her, no words.

“Go in,” and a hand on her shoulder.

No end to the darkness.

“It’ll be fun, I promise.”

It sucks in their breaths and makes them echo.

“I know. A bit scary, but it’ll be worth it.”

Down and in, the depths of the world.

“The best present, Clare...”

She nods, but if there had been the room to run...

Not wide enough to face it straight, she turns to lead with one shoulder. Into dark and cool and thickened air, they move through the gap for long minutes. The bones and body of the house, slow, shuffling, bumping hips and toes and knees.

“It’s tight,” she whispers, “Are you sure...?”

His hand on her shoulder and she must go forth.

Cracked plaster leans and floorboards creak. Misjoins in walls let in a little light, stripes and rungs in milk and ice. Mold invades in layers of smell and taste while overhead the baulks of wood that rib the roof dangle threads of dusty web, patiently fishing for faces or hair.

And there, through a dead end of wooden boards, a needle of light stabbing the floor, lazily aswim with dust. “Stoop,” he says, the closeness of wood remaking his voice. “Put your eye to the hole and look through.”

She turns around as best she can. Half his face is queasy in milk, the rest unknown in black. She turns and bends and looks through the hole. A sting of light, taking its time

to resolve into image. “What are we looking at?” she whispers.

“You tell me.”

“I don’t...”

And clarity then—two barren cells, paneled in wood, lit by square windows quartered into glass round-warped like bottle-ends. Both are bare except for the folding chair in each, a thin wall keeping the cells from each other and cutting the peephole in half.

“Rooms,” she says, “Rooms in my house I never knew were...” She feels the tightening of his hand on her shoulder. “Is my present in one of those rooms?”

“Secret rooms,” says the uncle, the lightness of his voice upset with tremor. “We’re going to see things. Learn something.”

A step away from the hole bumps her against his body. “Want to go back,” she says, “I don’t like this. Please, I don’t like this, Martin.”

His other hand tightens around her waist and in that moment comes the high clatter and scrape of metal—something working in a lock.

“Look through, Clare.” he says, “Just look.”

Her eye is down in time to see the door of the left cell open. Her father enters; a small, slight man, his shoulders strengthless slopes. His thin-lipped mouth is set, surrounded by skin still raw from a recent shave. Her wears a white shirt, black waistcoat, black trousers. They hang loose from his skeletal frame.

In his bony hands is something wrapped in pale yellow cloth; he cradles it, holds it to his chest like something suckling. The thing is too small for a child, too round. He sits on the folding chair and faces the dividing wall. The girl peers at his profile, trying to figure her father out, but she only gets a moment.

Softly the door to the other cell opens, letting her mother in. Half a head taller than her husband, her dark hair cut in pageboy to frame the plumpness of her face. Double-chinned and swollen-eyed, she's wiped it free of makeup—no blue eyeliner, no scarlet lips. She'd never seemed so naked before. She matches him in monochrome—white blouse and a black skirt tight across the roll of her hips.

In her hand she holds a golden key. Crossing the cell she comes to the dividing wall and with a gentle click opens

a window in the wood. The flap falls down on her husband's side.

The cells are connected.

She sits cross-legged and faces the opening.

Silence.

The girl does not have to be held to look, her uncle's hands no more than a suggestion of force, her own splayed either side of the peephole. "What are they doing?" she asks and goes unanswered. She turns her head, pressing the unwatering eye to the hole, unable to hold her mother and father at once. "What are they doing?" she asks again.

"*Watch* them," whispers her uncle and that is all the explanation for now.

The scene before her silent and symmetrical still—finally, her father lifts the thing from his lap and begins to unwrap the yellow cloth. In the cell opposite, watching through the window, her mother leans forward in her seat, hands gathering over her naked mouth.

Slowly, with each layer revealed, something shines in the light of little windows, the weak anemic gleam of wheat—*brass*. The color of flames just beginning, of bleached and dirtied gold. The thing in her father's hands, layer after layer of brass, beaten into an onion bulb.

“Brass Onion,” says her uncle, and a soft of reverence in his voice, “Brass Onion...”

“What is it?”

“It’s a thing. It’s an excuse to let things happen. Can’t you smell it?”

She sniffs an inbreath and can smell only him, his aftershave smelling of alcohol sharp.

“If you can’t make one grow you build one—just take the body of an old Brass Onion. Shine it up so it’s good as new.”

“What’s it for?”

“You’re *seeing* what it’s for. Look at them. It’s a gift we get to give each other.” Aftershave stings and leaves a taste in her mouth. “It’s a gift. Don’t they look happy?”

Her father lifts the metal bulb to his lips and watched by his wife and watching her, he kisses the cold between its layers, white is tooth and red is tongue, once, twice, a final time.

Through the window in the dividing wall he passes the Brass Onion.

She rises to take it.

Her nails sharp carnelian fangs; they flash as she handles the bulb. Thin metal creaks as a tip is bent back, as a layer

is slowly peeled away. It shines, a brass knife, and sinks in to cut—she hisses an inbreath through gritted teeth—

Red, a sudden bright in the cold white cell.

“*Mam!*” gasps the girl in the gap in the wall but louder the voice of her father, a gruff aggression, his body pressed to the wood division, “Has it cut you?” he growls. “Has it cut?”

“It has,” she says, “Michael, it has...”

“Where? Tell me—”

“My fingers. My palm.”

“Is it long?” He licks his lips. “Is it *deep*?”

“Deep,” she says, “The length of it, wrist to finger. Straight and bleeding.” Her forehead is against the wall. Only the thinness of wood separating. “Michael,” she whispers, “The *heat* of it.”

“Another layer,” he says, “Another. Take it down, love. Take it off.”

With red-slicked fingers she grips the outermost layer, bending it back with a crack and whinge of brass. The length of her arm she passes slowly over the winding blade—another cut, another line in red, and she laughs with it, a tiny breath of chuckle.

Discarded, the brass foil falls to the floor. The mother slowly places all weight on a heel, and torturing whine, forces a hole through the metal. She wipes the bleeding hand down the front of her blouse—blood in vivid slashes across her breasts.

The girl in the wall looks away, “I don’t want to be here. Please. I don’t want to see. That’s their place. That’s their secret business. I’ve no *right* to—”

His hand on her head turns her back to the needle of the light and the scene beyond. “Watch,” he says, “Watch how your mother takes it,” a catch of excitement in his smile, “Watch what she does.”

Trying to twist, her shoulder rubs against the wall and takes with it a veil of web, the whole thing coming down in bridal lengths across her face, draping, intertwining in hair—

“*Get off me,*” her voice the highest sharp, a scream beginning as a gathered breath, a tremulous sound in the throat, killed by his pressing hand.

“Don’t,” he whispers, “*Don’t.*”

She feels the web like a lasting breath, calling down bodies of hair, nests of legs. Spiders, there could be spiders—

“Watch...” She is bent to look again, pale light drying the wet from her eyes. “Just watch...” The taste of the uncle’s hands—fingers upon her lips, moving to rub between them. The other arm around her is a squeeze and there is no air in the heart of the house.

Thinking: Lost in the spaces. Left to run the walls like rats.

Crying, calling, dying in dark.

Crouching bones when the house is pulled down.

She watches animal bodies in agony arch. “What are they doing? Why are they doing this?”

“Watch and listen,” says her uncle, “Let them act it out for you.”

“Is this the real them?” she whispers, “Is this what they really are? I don’t... I can’t recognize...”

She watches her mother hold her wound to the little window. Her husband bends and gets the best look. “Oh love,” he murmurs, “Oh love.” His finger through the window lightly traces the length of wounds. “Are they hurting you?”

“Almost,” and she grins, “Nearly.”

“How about now?” and he presses a finger in, edges of cut opening to allow.

“Oh yes,” she says, “That’s...”

He widens with the work of a fingernail. Can he get it up to the first knuckle? No, but near enough. He withdraws it red and cleans it on the yellow cloth. His gaunt face just fits in the window, can just reach through for a little lick. She closes her hand in a fist and beats it resounding on the wooden wall.

(High giggle in the uncle's throat.)

The father rose with a circle of blood on the tip of his nose. The woman laughs: "The state of you, Michael. You should see yourself!" He tries to lick it off but his tongue tip isn't good enough. The palm of his hand wipes it away and he smiles, seeming to show every one of his teeth. "Me now," he says, motioning with his hands, "Pass it back."

Bloodied fingers send the bulb through the opening. He holds the Onion reverent, thumb caressing the diminished thing, wiping red both dried and wet. His voice is soft. "Tell me what you want me to do. Tell me what you'd like to see..."

Her turn to be the mouth in the window—"Pierce yourself on the points." All gentleness gone, she is only command. "Stick yourself with the sharp of the thing." She bends in half, the hang of smeared breasts heavy shadows

in blouse, the round of her rear straining the zip of her skirt.

The girl has the littlest voice. “Is that what I’ll do when I’m older?”

Her uncle nods. “Yes.”

“Did you?”

“Once...” and an edge of wistful memory there, hard layers stripped to show the soft. “We were young. I took a leaf in secret. My parents used the rooms...”

(A leaf teased from the bulb, and her father contorts it into dagger sharp.)

“We grew the Onion ourselves. Sat up all night sharpening until it was ready. We came to the cells together. We were young and didn’t know better. I asked her to do something and she did. She *wanted* to do it.”

(“*Sharper*,” says her mother.)

“A cut. Ring finger to wrist. Too deep, too much, and we were alone.” Her uncle’s hand is up to point. “Do you see? That brown between the white? The stains?” There, between her mother’s feet, discolored wood, long stripes dark between the boards.

He rests his chin softly on her scalp. “I have photos,” he says and the blow of his breath moves hair and web. “I

can show you her. After, when we're done? Her name was Clare as well..."

Long silence, save for the creak of unfurling brass.

"Okay," says Clare, "Okay..."

"It's done," says her father, rolling brass across fingers and palms. "Where do you want it?" he asks.

"Crook of your arm. That soft other side of the elbow. Cut there."

He nods and gathers a breath.

"Pierce yourself," she whispers, "Through the cloth. Make a hole."

The point through and deep into arm and her father grits his teeth in the grinning.

"Slower," she snaps, "I want to *see* it happen."

"That better?" he gasps, flicking spit up and onto his lips. "Is that good?" Red runs the length of his arm, coming to beads at the elbow, hanging there, threading down to drop.

She nods. "Now twist," she says, "Just a half-twist."

He hesitates.

"Go!" she commands and he grips the brass with shaking fingers and twists—the roar throws him down onto his knees and halved he moans another softer one. It

melts in laughter and a wheeze, and reclaiming strength he is on his feet again. “Tell me, love. Where else should it go? Name the place and I’ll put it there.”

She is a set of lips, severed and set in a wooden square. “I want you to get it in the perfect place. The soft under your chin.” She taps her double with a bloodied thumb. “I want to see it lift your tongue.”

He smiles his widest. “*Wicked...*” his single whispered word. Slowly up with the spike of brass and a change in his eyes, something loosed, unfocused. He leans to the window, opening his mouth to show, and though the girl in the gaps can’t see, she can hear her mother clear: “Oh,” and longer, “*Ohhh*.”

Hands of the father work the brass up and down under the chin.

Thick dust of the gap and shattered walls, letting in light and the glow of other rooms and there is no space to turn around. Tears are in her eyes, web an unbrushed tickle over cheeks and lips and her arms are pinned at her sides. “Why are they doing this? Why are you making me watch?” She pulls an arm away from him and before he can grab she slams a fist against the wall—wood seems to bend with the

force of it. The noise fills both cells and only slowly fades away.

Her head is caught again, killing the second thump before it can sound.

No matter—her father has heard. He rises from his chair and slowly crosses the wooden boards. She can see the quizzical look on his face as he approaches. Her mother has turned to watch as well, the blood on her hands and breasts darkening almost to a brown.

The father presses himself against the wall, his body blocking the light through the hole, leaving Clare and her uncle suspended in black, their bodies hints in navy and grey. Her thump is softly returned as he speaks “Is that you? Are you in there Martin?”

A pause.

And then: “I am.”

“And have you got her with you?”

Another pause.

“I do.”

And then the longest pause.

She wants to say, “Da.”

To say sorry, that she was made watch.

She wants to say, “Help me.”

But her mouth is covered and only gentle whimpers come through.

Her father speaks: “Good. Make sure she sees everything.”

She can feel her uncle nodding at nothing.

“But Martin?”

“Yes?”

“Keep her quiet until we’re done, will you?” The father moves away, letting the needle of light pierce through. A whip of her head frees her mouth for a moment—“Dad!”—a bursting noise, flung through the gap to resound.

She hears her own voice perish in the cells, hears her father turn and tut, repeating, testily, “Martin, keep her quiet.”

And then the hand is back over her mouth and no point in resisting.

She watches him bend at the window, asking his wife, “Where were we?”

“Your turn,” she tells him.

A blade is passed through the window. “Draw it along your lips,” he says. She paints with his blood and smiling,

shows how red her lips have become. “Am I pretty?” she simpers.

“Too pretty,” he says.

The Brass Onion passes back and forth for an hour—

She pierces the lobe of her ears.

He slashes the inside of his thigh.

She loses a thumbnail from the right.

He slices lashes from his lids.

She sits and cuts the soles of her feet.

They laugh.

And then they are finished. Brass in stained and shining leaves litter the floor of both cells.

“Clare?” her father is whispering, “Clare?” She looks up. The Onion no more than a seed between finger and thumb, stripped of all its leaves bar one. He holds it to the hole in the wall. “You see it? Isn’t it beautiful?”

She stares. Says nothing.

“Wouldn’t you like to be a part of this?”

White light through windows thick as bottle-ends—the Brass Onion brightness, spotted and flecked with points of blood and tight the hands of her uncle around her. “Say yes,” he mutters into her hair, “Say yes. I’ll never get the chance again. I wouldn’t wish that on you, love.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t want to,” and she is begging the three of them, “Please, don’t make me.”

There is a purr and plead to her father’s voice, his body moving across the peephole. “Tell me what to do with this last leaf Clare. Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” He bends down to show her the wet curve of his smile. “It’ll be my gift to you. Happy birthday, love.”

The mother comes to her half of the hole and presses her cheek against the wall. Her voice is beckoning gentle: “Clare. It’s good. It’s what we do, Clare...” She shows her wounds to her daughter. They run just a little red.

“No, please. I’m begging you. I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to watch you bleed.”

Mother’s voice suddenly a blade of brass. “It’s what this family does you stupid girl—”

She presses her forehead to the wood. “*I want to leave!*”

“Then tell me, Clare,” and there is a break in her father’s voice, “We’ll finish this and all go out together. As a family.” She can see his eyes, peering back through the hole. “Don’t forget, we’ve a party to throw later.”

“Nice and easy to start,” her mother says, “We’ll show you how it gets done.” Her father nods. “And when it grows again, love, we’ll tell you what we want from *you*.”

They peer at her. The gentle hands of her uncle pull webs from the trappings of hair. Glacier slow Clare puts her mouth to the hole and tells her father: “Cut yourself.”

“Where, pet? Where do you want me to do it?”

Through the hole she stares. Grin—the endless reddened grin of him.

“Mouth,” she whispers, “Want to see you cut your mouth, Dad.”

He plucks the last layer from the Onion, folds it to a point and shows it to her. “Watch.” With a little gasp it goes through his cheek—peeling of flesh, a rind curling on the metal point. The barest whisper sound of it.

“Happy...Birthday...” he grunts. There—the movement of teeth in the wound.

Adults laugh.

Her mother shakes her plumpness with it.

Her uncle grips and presses against her back.

Her father grins.

Red teeth.

Red tongue.

Red teeth.

(Part of her.
Here.
Always.)



Her name is Clare.
Three hours ago she turned sixteen.
This boy will be her first.
(In truth it could have been anyone.)
She sits on the chair in her cell and takes the Brass
Onion from him.
“Now,” she says, “Tell me what to do.”
He swallowed. “I want you to... Uh.”
Through the window she watches him lick his lips.
Bright points of sweat on his forehead.
“Tell me to cut myself.”
“Uh...”
“*Tell* me.”
“I... want you to... cut.”
Laughing at the wobble of his adam’s apple she teases a
layer away.
Carnelian nails.

There are gentle noises in the wooden wall.

She smiles.

Uncle Martin, watching.

She has a little wink for him.

She cuts.

A Corpse

Connie A. Lopez-Hood

A child. Grew. She did not. Where a school should have.
In the dirt. Sticky puckered fingers. Palm hug fruit. Dick
& Jane. Right hand over flat chest. A day's work.

A girl. Stir & sweat. Grow. She did. A drive-in movie.
Subtitles. Jasmine flowers in black & white & the dark
silhouette of a man's head. A dry mustached laugh. A
pulsing. A stun. An acceptance. A missing subtitle. A
drive home.

A woman. Pearls & gasoline. Shirk. Business exchange. A
missing finger. Fried catfish & a quick fuck. Where a
pillow should have. No talk. Cash only. No talk.

A lady. A creamy cat. Shrink. Real pearls & china. Blank
phone. Blanker mail. Green dripping plants. Dust. Teas.
Teeth form hymns. A hymen still pristine, well intact.



Driftwood | Nancy Syrett

Full of Lotus

Melanie Browne

She meditated so often,
her mind became a lotus,
a single white flower,
she didn't eat, or sleep,
and the petals began to
fall and drop,
fall and drop,
reminding her of the
monsoon that came
after he said he
was leaving,
in his white,
white suit



Lily Pond | Susana H. Case

The Childless Women Remember Being Fourteen

Robin Silbergleid

That pubescent spring we carried our eggs in baskets. Some with pink blankets or clothes made of felt, with painted faces and bodies. Mine slept in a pink purse that opened into a bassinet for a doll I'd long since given up. We brought them to gym class, to geometry, to home economics. They rode with us on the bus home, and then we left them. We French-braided each other's hair and talked on the phone while they sat at the kitchen table in their cradles. Unlike our baby brothers, they didn't cry, didn't need diaper changes or food.

We watched movies in health class about human reproduction, the penis raising its head in curiosity and desire. Its gaze was inescapable. We stopped going to the woods alone, the spot by the old quarry littered with tobacco tins and used condoms.

We carried our eggs in baskets, and one by one they broke. Mine came rushing out in a wave of red. In the hall, a teacher came up behind me, told me to go to the nurse. I

went to my locker and put on my coat, kept my back to the wall. When I got home, I scrubbed the stain from my pants. Our bodies wrote stories in crimson letters, stories we censored, flushed down.

Sometimes we can hear our children's voices, floating the pipes of our houses, under the streets, beneath the town.



Summer Crossing | Peggy Acott

No Roots Grow Between Us

Rewa Zeinati

What I remember the most
are the fall leaves. Color-heavy
and gathered like precious stones
on the ground.

Saint Louis was a long
divided street I knew all about,

but never said.

And I had never before seen
the way a Dogwood tree in spring
bears the possibility
of weddings.

I was the only Arab
in the English department.

It's easy to say,
You are.

I am.

No roots grow between us.

My gentle Rabbi classmate
(and I had never before
met a Jew), asked me multiple
times to perform poetry together,

he played *oud*, and drew Arabic
on the board to show me
that he, too, knows.

I ran into him in Trader Joe's one day,
or was it that he called
while I shopped for cheap wine
and cheese, I can't remember.

But I never took him up on his offer,
never heard him play *oud*, never said,
yes, I am different, I don't mind
if you get to know me. My heart, too,
is full of song—

Sometimes, blacks listen to Carly Simon, too

Erren Geraud Kelly

She would be someone
to read poetry to,
While watching the boats
Sail off martha's vineyard,
Or bicycling by the
Left bank in Paris.
Carly would take great pictures,
Standing next to the gargoyles
At the Notre Dame
Cathedral.
Even at 68 years young,
Her body hasn't told
On her yet.
Her breasts are perky
And responsive; nipples becoming bullets
to the touch of ice cubes
I'd serenade her with old-timey tunes,
Before we made out in front
Of a fire.
She would shock me
By reciting a rap song,
Making it sound
Cool.
Forget youth, there's a lot
To be said for experience.

Love Poison #9

Hilary A. Zaid

It had been nearly three months since we'd decided to get married, and, while scientists had managed to clone an entire sheep, Francine and I hadn't made any progress toward the altar. *Cold feet*, I told myself, *cold feet*. Then, one Thursday afternoon at the end of the summer, Francine stepped through the door, mysteriously transformed back into my sweet, adorable red-haired girl and I warmed right up.

I could feel it as soon as she shucked her scuffed clogs into the familiar pile of our mingled, worn shoes. "You're home," I observed. She looked tired. Some sort of white goo—flour and water paste?—clung, dried and flaking, to the tops of her jeans. Francine leaned in to kiss me and, for the first time in weeks, I leaned in closer to kiss her back. She smelled familiar, warm and comfortable, like the spice of sycamore bark filling our whole short block of Manzanita Court in the fall. "I missed you."

Francine dropped her bag to the floor. "Has my mom called?" She headed toward the kitchen. The dogs, who had

leapt at her thighs first in greeting, and then to gnaw at all the bits of paste they could reach by balancing on their hind legs, scrabbled along in front like dancing circus animals. I followed, scenting something more elusive. “I need to start writing down some of the things the kids say again,” she said, opening the aluminum canister on the counter and fishing out a handful of almonds. “Remember Daniel? The one who drags around his mother’s old nursing bra?” What was it about her? Her clothes, the same brown painter’s pants she had worn this weekend, weren’t new. She hadn’t gotten her hair cut. “You know, liver trees and just this for all?” Francine laughed, reaching into the aluminum box marked “Bread” for a bag of chocolate chips.

I’d missed the punch line. Francine turned to Lola. “You’d like liver treats and just that for all, wouldn’t you, girl?” She eyed me with a half smile, her hazel eyes bright with suspicion. “*What?*”

“I missed you,” I repeated, wrapping my arms around her waist. She didn’t feel different. That was it. She felt, all of a sudden, the same. Stupidly, I insisted on it, “I really, really missed you.” A different person—a smarter person—would have pretended nothing had ever been

wrong. But, like so many women of my generation—like so many women I knew—I often confused intimacy with telling the truth.

Just that afternoon at the Foundation where I daily interview the world's last survivors of the Holocaust, Mrs. Levit had smoothed the edges of her skirt along the edge of the low, blue chair, tucking herself back into the cool, blue silence of the interview room. "Marching into Germany, isn't it ironic? But, after all that, we had to escape the Russians."

Mrs. Levit smiled. "Isaac's people lived in Yuzint—hardly a village, compared to Kaunas"—threaded between the calcifications of dehumanization and loss, a living vein of pride—*city girl, country boy*—"where my mother's mother grew up. We were," she concluded, her final consonants billowing with breath, "the only ones left."

Mrs. Levit shifted in her seat, her shoes creaking slightly as she pushed her feet against the flat blue carpet. Some of my subjects sat perched so far forward that, on camera, they appeared formal, overeager, in danger of flight.

"What happened to Isaac's family?" I asked. Mrs. Levit's husband Isaac had died ten years before.

She lifted a thin, burlled finger and drew it silently across her throat.

“All of them?”

Mrs. Levit nodded.

“Did Isaac tell you, Kajla, how they were killed?” I held my pen loosely, my clipboard settled in the lap of my pants.

“Ellen,” Mrs. Levit spoke my name for the first time; her accent made it sound truncated, somehow, like “Helen” without the “H,” the initial sound swallowed in a soft swirl across her palate. “He never did.”

I sat quietly, waiting, while Mrs. Levit paused, profile to the camera. “We never spoke of those things to one another,” she said tenderly. “We never,” she added, “never needed to. It was already between us. And the details,” Mrs. Levit paused again, her tongue resting along the edge of her teeth; she waved the details away with a flutter of her hand.

Mrs. Levit looked at my face so long I had to force myself not to look away. “Are you married?” she asked me. She glanced at my hands. “Do you *haf*,” she asked, “a boyfriend?”

I felt my face flush. “I have someone,” I said, “a fiancée.” I had never used the word before to describe Francine. Mrs. Levit and I could each assume the number

of e's we thought was relevant. Mrs. Levit smiled, a polite, disinterested smile. "*Mazel tov*," she murmured politely. Her lips had been frosted with a pale pink that had faded, now, to the deeper red brown of her mouth showing through. Then her smile, too, faded. "You understand, Ellen. You allow each other separateness, things you do not speak of."

"Privacy," I suggested.

"Dignity." She corrected me firmly, with finality.

Did I understand? Life is full of endless separations; who needed to build them in? How many years had my mother sat through them, the string of workdays on which my father put on his bright silk tie and drove out into the world, *The Wall Street Journal* under his arm, to exchange property for money, while back at home, in the twilight living room under the glow of a Tiffany lamp, she waited for him to come back?

And yet, we had our separations, too. Which is to say: Francine had her secrets, and I had mine.

Not two months ago, I'd come home from a late lunch with Jill, unexpected, early. (Petite, half-Chinese, half-Indonesian, with the fierce dark eyes of Kaurava and the

quick, clever mouth of a New York Jew, Jill was a graduate student at Stanford; she knew more about Babi Yar than possibly anyone on Earth besides Dina Pronicheva (formerly of the Kiev puppet theater; she had managed to leap into the Kiev ravine *before* being shot, lay for hours among the thousands of corpses, under the groaning wounded, and to remain silent when a suspicious Nazi kicked her breast and trod on her hand until the bones cracked, and to then dig her way out.[1]) We'd been meeting every Wednesday for what I thought of, despite the prickling along my arms and legs throughout these meals, as an innocent, collegial lunch.)

When I put my key in the lock, the front door pulsed. I walked into a tsunami of sound, the entire living room vibrating to a deep, groaning beat. "Hi!" The music blaring from the speakers swallowed my voice whole. Francine's jeans lay in a hasty heap at the foot of the stairs. I stepped out of my shoes and started for the bedroom.

So I've got to get up early in the morning... The synthesizers wonked as I tiptoed forward... *to find me another lover.* Jill's eyes flashed in my mind. As I reached the bottom step, a cowbell rang out its clanking alarm. What was this? Some kind of payback? My pulse raced to match the beat.

I crept up the bedroom stairs and stopped halfway: the bedroom door was ajar. I had to lean in close, low to see Francine. She was standing near the foot of the bed, her face contracted in intense focus. No, not standing: moving. Sweating. Flushed, Francine threw her head back, throat exposed. My heart thudded. The only thing I could hear over the music was the hushed panting of my own breath.

I crept a slow step higher—I was pulling myself up the stairs by my fingertips, now, my head hunched low—then another, until I could see all of her. From top to toe, her whole body throbbed, her hips rocking, her head and arms swaying; a fluid line of movement. I stared, breathless, unable to move, while I watched Francine: dancing alone.

I gripped the stair above me with both hands, crept down the stairs backwards, stepped noiselessly into my shoes, and, quietly, shut the front door. As I headed across Broadway, I stopped for just a second to look back. Behind the redwood that stood outside our bedroom window, I'd thought for a moment that I could see the silhouette of her arms moving in time with some invisible music against the blinds.

“What’s up with you?” Francine laughed, tucking the chocolate chips back into the canister, smoothing her hands over the flaking paste crusted across her pants. She moved like a dancer, though she no longer danced.

How much should I say? How much should I keep to myself? How much truth could our relationship handle? How much dignity? I wasn’t Mrs. Levit. Or my mother. I didn’t want to be.

I picked at the crust on the legs of her jeans. “I’ve been feeling kind of—” I winced, reluctant to reveal the extent of my recent defection “—distant.”

“Mmmm,” Francine nodded. “I think I’ve noticed that,” she said, tapping her fingers against my knuckles. “Distant how?” she wanted to know.

“Mmmm. You know,” I shrugged again. “Kind of—annoyed?” I smoothed my palm along the tops of Francine’s thighs. A little slurry of paste flakes littered the counter beside her legs; on her jeans, white stains clung to the spots where I had picked it off, ghost continents on an antique map.

“Annoyed about...?” Francine hopped suddenly down from the counter, glanced quickly at the blinking answering machine and led me out to the couch.

“You know,” I fudged. “Little things.” I looked up into her earnest, truth-seeking face. Is it possible I had actually hidden this so well? That thought in itself was frightening. “Like,” I suggested, wanting more than ever to tell her everything, trying to make it sound innocent, “never putting away the jam.” Small things. Laughably dumb. “Or, um...” It was so silly, now, wasn’t it, “complaining about this stupid couch.” I thumped the futon Francine had been begging me to get rid of practically since we’d moved in together.

Francine narrowed her eyes, skeptical. “So, for the past few days...”

“Weeks,” I corrected, meekly.

“Weeks?” Francine’s rust-colored eyebrows rose an inch. “For weeks, now, you’ve been mad at me for...?”

“Everything?” I concluded, innocent as a child. It was okay. It was over now. It was time to confess.

“Everything,” she marveled. “Fabulous.” She sounded mad.

“It’s nothing.” I backpedaled. I lay my palm flat on Francine’s thigh. “It was the same for Frederica, when she and Paolo got engaged.”

“Frederica?”

“It’s just cold feet. Debbie says her brother’s whole theory is, you think life is like a beer commercial,” I stammered, “but it’s really not.”

Francine stared at me in disbelief. “Debbie?”

Maybe I needed to explain the beer commercial thing better. “So what you’re saying,” Francine shifted her hips away from me, “is that you’ve been secretly pissed at me for months—for no reason at all, apparently,”—that part wasn’t true; of course, there’d been reasons, a thousand reasons—“and you’ve been talking divorce with practically everyone we know!” She threw up her hands in facetious delight.

I leaned in close to my old, my familiar Francine. “It was just cold feet,” I reassured her. I’d decided not to mention Jill. “And I wasn’t contemplating divorce.” I’d just contemplated not marrying—“I just needed some perspective.” I reached out with a tentative hand to stroke her auburn curls. How could I ever have forgotten Francine?

My petting seemed to soothe her. It could have gone either way, but she was starved for a little ordinary affection. “Anyways,” I insisted, “it’s over.” I leaned

sideways. A streak of paste clung to the hair along her forearm. Unable to resist, I stripped it with my fingernails.

“Ouch!” Francine winced, rubbing the spot. She considered me, her cheeks flushed with pain. “I thought you said it was *over*.”

“Sorry.” I was.

Francine stood up. “I’m going to take a shower before you end up depilating my entire arm.”

“I could do a Brazilian wax,” I offered, as she headed up the bedroom stairs.

I knew she hadn’t entirely forgiven me, but this was a good start.

I was in the kitchen mincing garlic when Francine came down in a clean t-shirt, the dark ringlets of her hair dripping, and settled her chin between my neck and shoulder. She smelled of orange oil and spice, heavy and sharp.

I tensed. “You’re wet.”

Francine moved toward the fridge. “Have you seen my girlfriend?”

“What?”

“I come home and you’re all over me. You admit you’ve been mad at me for *months*,” Francine’s eyebrows telegraphed surprise and grief, “but you insist it’s over, and now—” Francine held out her palms.

“Now *what*?”

Francine’s eyebrows flew up. Her eyes popped wide with astonishment. “You’re like *the Two Faces of Ellen*!” I glowered, caught. It seemed I couldn’t help myself. “Ellen—what’s going on with you?”

My eyes fell to the counter. “I don’t know.” I toyed with the knife.

“Put that down,” Francine ordered me, quietly. “You’re acting very strange.”

“You keep—” I started. As much as I felt myself going mad, I also felt certain it was all Francine’s fault. “You’re just different!” My position, I knew, was indefensible. I clung to it with conviction.

Francine and I stood, unmoving, my back against the kitchen counter. She looked hurt and confused. Beside her, the old Wedgewood stove with its blue flames glowed under Francine’s cast iron pot. (“I should probably have told you,” Francine had joked, pulling out the pot, black and insanely heavy, the day when her boxes of stuff and my

boxes of stuff moved into this house and became our stuff—"I'm a witch.")

"Wait a second..." Francine narrowed her eyes.

My mind kept going back to that night months ago at our friends Trisha and June's: how Francine, fresh from her spa day with June, her curls piled prissily up on the top of her head, had opened the door, beautiful as a Barbie.

"The Spa Day..." she said. Francine disappeared upstairs.

In the kitchen, I threw a salad together, kept the water boiling. "I can't put on the *capellini*," I mumbled, "unless you're down here to eat it." Upstairs, the water went on. Downstairs, the water heater fired with a dull roar.

"Shit!" I brought my hands up to my face, then recoiled with the sting of allium in my eyes. Francine and I had been in love—crazy enough to decide to get married, to make it up as we went along. Now, here we were, distant, fighting. Maybe this was a warning: get out now, or give up happiness. I dabbed my streaming eyes with a wet paper towel and sighed. Downstairs, the pipes knocked once into silence.

“Well?” Francine had appeared behind me, wet spots blossoming on my shirt where her curls touched it, warmth blooming again inside me at her warm, familiar smell.

I shook my head in mute confusion. “It’s you,” I whispered. There was some trick happening here, some invisible transformation: *loathly lady/ lovely lady*.

Francine locked her arms firmly around my waist—as if I were the one who might suddenly change form. “Ellen,” she scolded me gently. “You’re a very simple girl. Shallow, some might say, terribly, terribly shallow,” she murmured. “But I think, simple. A doggie.” On the floor, Lola cocked a sleeping ear. Francine touched my face pityingly. “Come.”

Francine led me through the house, up the bedroom stairs, into our bathroom. There, on the red-tile counter, sat two bottles of shampoo beaded with water. Francine picked up the first: a low, fat, bottle the color of butter, the label worn through in spots. She held the bottle of Cedar Birch Naturals under my nose. “Smell,” she commanded.

I inhaled the magnified scent of something so familiar I barely noticed it: the warm spice of Manzanita and cedar, cut grass and clover. It was the clean smell of Francine in bed at night, the warm whiff of my nose behind her ear.

“Nice,” I commented. I wasn’t sure what she expected me to say.

Francine capped the bottle and set it back on the counter. She picked up the second. Tall, frosted glass, the second bottle looked like something meant to hold vodka, one of those colorless drinks that needs thick, cut glass to make it look magical, something you’d ask for by name. The liquid in this one was deep clear red, vivid as blood. Francine spilled three drops onto the tip of her finger, where they clung, shocking, like the ruby beads of a pomegranate. She lifted the shimmering potion under my nose.

Poison! The bitter of orange rinds seared my sinuses. Hints of sandalwood spice set my teeth on edge. My nostrils flared.

“Ah,” Francine murmured. She reached for the faucet and rinsed off the stubborn ruby drops. She tightened the silver cap with the efficiency of a scientist. “*Product*,” she crossed her arms in satisfied incredulity across her chest, “from the Spa.” The word hung in the air between us like a curse.

Francine looked at me, and I at her, with wide, disbelieving eyes.

“The spa guy said it contained pheromones.”

“Did he say it would drive women wild?” I rolled my eyes, a mock lunatic version of the real lunatic I’d become.

“Women?” Francine eyed the bottle. “Oh—maybe I was supposed to get the other version.”

Francine and I went stupid with relief. Could affection really be so circumstantial, so idiotically capricious? Or is it just the forces disrupting love that are? I looked at the pomegranate-red potion shimmering on the counter and understood: I’d spent my season in Hell.

Francine picked up the bottle between her forefinger and thumb like she was picking up a cylinder of radioactive waste and carried it over to the trash. “Hey!” I objected. “That’s expensive!”

Francine shot me a warning look whose meaning was either, “Are you joking?” or “Are you insane?” Then she narrowed her eyes, her liquid eyes whose irises glinted with hard flecks of green. “On second thought,” she said, “I’d better hold onto this.” I looked at her with horror. Was this a test? The true test of the loathly lady? (The loathly lady was, oddly, one of Francine’s favorite love motifs: the medieval knight, set on the impossible quest to discover what women want most, finally gets his answer from a

hideous old hag, who divulges it on the condition that he marry her; true to his word, he does, but lives with his promise miserably—"Thou art soo olde, and soo loathly also!" Francine crooned, her averted face a rictus of mock agony—until one day the old hag gives him an ultimatum in the form of a choice: a wife who is old and faithful, or beautiful and faithless.)

Did I need to promise her fidelity, no matter how she smelled? "If I ever catch you looking at another woman," she said. "I'll give her this. As a gift." I laughed a little nervously and forced my mind to remain blank. The things Francine could understand about me were unfathomable. I nodded as Francine, my partner, my bride, sleuth of my dim, animal brain, shut the bathroom cabinet on the scent of danger.

"If it makes you feel any better," Francine offered, as we headed back down to the kitchen, where the big black pot was boiling over into the gas below with violent orange hisses, "You have some completely revolting habits yourself."

"Like what?" Released from my spell, I was, perhaps, overconfident.

Francine turned down the flame and broke a handful of capellini into the pot, tending her black cauldron like the bewitched and bewitching creature she had turned out to be.

“Like, leaving your dirty socks all over the place,” she answered without a beat. As if she’d been waiting for a chance to say it.

“That’s ridiculous.”

Francine gulped down a *ho! ho!* “Go look in the shoe corner,” she told me.

“The shoe corner is not ‘all over the place,’” I objected. “It’s where we take off our shoes and socks.”

“And the bathroom floor.”

“Which is right near the hamper.”

“And the living room,” Francine went on. “Would be...?”

“The place where you *store* the socks that are a little bit worn, but still good enough not to have to wash, and I need to take them off before I go out into the yard.”

“Ah...”

Frederica had told me that when she and Paolo got engaged, she thought, “You mean, I’m going to have to pick up this guy’s stinky sweat socks from the living room

floor *for the rest of my life?*” “It’s like you’re calling me a man!” I objected.

“Look,” Francine said, as I poised myself for protest. “We don’t need to go on. The point is, we both have habits that annoy each other. Every couple does. Except,” she smoothed the loose, steam-curled hairs away from her temples, “maybe Frederica and Paolo.”

“No—” I answered, happily. “He annoys her, too.”

“The point is, we keep choosing each other.”

[1] Pronicheva told her story to the writer Anatoli Kuznetsov. Her history is recorded in Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust* (Rinehart, & Winston, 1985).



Johnson City, TX | Nancy Ryan Keeling

Dividing, Driving

Allie Marini Batts

I am merging onto I-10
before you find that
the heap of black boots
you complained about
tripping over all the time
are missing from
your closet.

I wanted the glass flask Rod Creech kept hid Eric Schwerer

in a mud hole somewhere past the last row of homes
where dirt mounds were piled, riddled with broken
sandstone and shale. I'd heard he kept it
near the far end where the woods'd begun
to whisker back with poke and thorn. I wanted
only to nudge the clear neck and screw cap with a stick,
maybe lift it to the light to see the level grin inside the glass,
maybe smash it, stomp the shards into the mud.
(Rod'd choked me once for nothing, held me by the neck,
squeezed my throat until his face filled with blood.)
Maybe I would drink it, that watered gin, hocker, piss,
whatever'd stink in my mouth and make me strong as him.

Letters Home

Jay Sims

1

I clung to the shore, but mighty Morpheus held me fast in his undertow. If I could but open my eyes his hold would loosen. My lids were heavy, my body not wanting to leave the warm wet blanket of permanent sleep as a thousand snakes slid out of the water and lingered on my skin, preparing their strike. We twisted and turned in the tropical bath; a dance for the gods. I saw my feet like two small detached pillars planted miles away. She rose up between them, larger than the universe itself. She wore white. Her face was the sun. Her hair, delicate fingers plucking beads of light out of the darkness. Her eyes saw every yesterday, her smile assured tomorrow's arrival.

"Wake up!" A lush, liquid, resonant voice no mortal could conceive.

"But I cannot."

"Wake up."

"What if I don't wish to wake up?"

"You must."

“The world is ugly.”

“The world is beautiful.”

“It’s a mockery.”

“It’s art.”

“I am not art. I am nothing.”

“You can be anything. Open your eyes.”

“I refuse.”

“I refuse to let you refuse.”

The shore of my death dream suddenly shrank into a vacuum. The snakes shot like lightning into the unseen distance. I bolted out of bed. Oxygen hit me like a knockout punch. I found my feet and struggled through my doorway, feeling walls, finding the hall that spun around and around, mocking my journey. I found the shape of Dad sitting there, stealing a moment of solitude before the workday began. He leapt from his chair:

“What is wrong with you?”

His voice was drawn out in stringy, syrupy threads that echoed from some far away place:

“Jay! (jay-jay-jay) What (t-t-t-t) have you done (ne-ne-ne-ne)?”

“Oh, e-e-e-t-t-th-h-e-e-er...fa-a-a-t-t-t-ther...for-r-r-g-g-i-i-i-f-f-f-o-r-r-g-g-o-o-t-t-t-f-o-o-r-r-g-g-g-e-t-t-f-f-fu-u-

u-u---smok-k-k-n-n-n-e-e-ed-d-a-a-a-s-s-smo-o-o-k-a-a-a,-s-
s-h-sh-sh-shi-i-t-t-t- I'm-m-m- gon-n-n-n-n-na-a-a-a..."

"Jay! (ay-ay-ay)" He gripped my shoulders, shaking me frantically.

"33 + 3 x @ x 7 x 7 = &*#\\$=r=r=4=*?"

Dad darted for his car keys and threw on a jacket:

"Follow (ow-ow) Me! (me-me)"

"Huhh? 7? 9x \$? Wha-a-a-t--i-i-i-s-s-s-wa-a-a...."

I landed in his car somehow.

"Drink this! You have to drink this!"

The doctor cried frantically, his voice bouncing like a hard rubber ball off of the cold walls of the last stop room. A red plastic cup forced my mouth open and rancid liquid chalk rushed down my throat like a tidal wave. *I want bubblegum flavor for my death watch, not standard issue overdose goop!*

A sky full of eyes shot down on me like stars in my dark night. The aliens were probing and prodding, talking in gravely gabble, consonants and vowels colliding.

"Vomit! You must vomit now!"

But you just told me to drink! Which is it? You make no sense, alien doctor!

The strangers conferred: "He's not throwing up."

“No, indeed, he’s not!”

“He must throw up. He simply must!”

“Yes, yes, of course!”

A bright light. A thousand watt invasion. Was it the light of man’s creation or the sun of a new world? Had the angel lost her fight with Morpheus?

The tired hands of time: tick...tick...click...clunk. Stop. Sleep.

24 hours...

“You’re back!” Chirped the chipper young nurse, bouncing like a butterfly around my room, drawing the shades, cruelly inviting the sunlight to join me. I stole a glance. My world had stopped spinning.

“Should I not be back?”

She leaned in close to whisper serious words that made her uneasy:

“We didn’t expect you to be joining us again.”

She raised one eyebrow and tilted her head in a soft scolding, motherly sort of way:

“We’re going to have to put you on careful watch.”

“Watch what? Watch me run out the door in my backless gown? I had too much fun, nothing more! I can walk, I can talk! I’m fine!”

Closer still, deeper whisper:

“You tried to die. There was enough...well...(look around the room, gather your secrets) enough *stuff* in you to take down ten men.”

“But...but wait a sec...”

My throbbing skull held me to my pillow. My words struggled against a sticky tongue.

“We’ll check in on you. You just rest.”

I caught the clipboard with a newborn eye as she leaned in: *1600 mgs. Attempted Suicide. Manic Depressive.*

My dealer had given me eight enchantment pills. They were for *life*, not death! Why did *anyone* dope himself? He’d handed them off quickly on a forgotten corner, always in a hurry, always doing business. “Here you go. You earned it, soldier. (runner, seller, fall guy, fool.) Just like bein’ drunk! But be damn careful with them!”

He said to never take more than four. I started at three of course, waited an hour, no glow. Four, nothing. Five, six and seven, same. *What is this crap? No wonder it was free!* Eight was the magic number, gathering the other seven and coursing quietly through me while I slept; commanding every blood vessel, steering me into deep, dark, uncharted waters.

I'd went to the city fair and eaten too much candy. It was suicide by simple self-amusement, but they'd never believe me. They thought I was a ghost. I was indeed dying to the world *they* knew. I was indeed trying to break through the surface of things.

They let me have a guitar in my room, but I could imagine their whispers, which they later admitted to:

"I think he has drugs inside of it. His friend brought it in, right past our desk."

One young nurse to another.

"Right past our desk?"

"He was walking rather quickly."

The sudden awareness of their own naïveté would redden their brows.

"Go to his room and have a peek."

"No, you do it!"

The pair likely listened briefly to the broken bird beating the strings, stretching his wings, struggling to sing.

"Well, perhaps it will help him. If he's taking drugs we'll know."

"It's shift change anyhow soon. Just make a note of it."

"Sure. (What form is that?)"

Across the street to Occupational Therapy I walked daily with the chain gang. We'd construct cute trinkets and hear pretty praises. We'd throw bows on baskets and fashion candy dishes from wooden craft kits. It was the first day of school, every day, for us, the souls who'd wandered beyond the barriers of "normal" life. We, the candy dish crew, had fallen, all but forgotten by the wayside, tripping and rolling away from the human race.

We were handed hobbies as consolation prizes.

Is there a diversion factory somewhere that specializes in basswood cutouts, ribbons and blueprints for those who can't quite finish the marathon? Does our cause feed families?

"Off to work, Dear. See you at five. Cuttin' soap holders today; can't wait!"

The world turned in our absence as we sat in the safe insulation of our stumbling blocks. Our biggest worry was keeping non-toxic glue out of our fingernails and making the tough decision between jelly beans and jujubes that would fill our creations. I was fond of both, and always torn. I never shared. The true mark of a man is how much candy he's willing to part with. Shame on me.

I saw you there, Mother, in your padded foam cubicle, not far from the padded cells, scribbling life sentences with educated guesses. You decided who was crazy and who was just lazy. Did they give you my file? I was your specialty. I can hardly blame you for paying me no mind as I walked down your office halls to the candy dish factory, inching back away from death. You live on the surface of things. I could never expect you to jump into my icy water; you would surely perish. Surely you found me in one of your books, I know I'm there in black and white. But you knew if you reached out your hand, I might pull you in.

You tried. You braved your way to the fourth floor of the hospital; the floor where death lives, where I was given back my marbles by the great Mystery, where I was to succumb, according to all logic. You sat with me in silence, drawn there by a flickering instinct, searching, but knowing not what your instinct had called you to find. Ghosts crowded the room. You saw them. Was your father among them? You stayed as long as you could. It was a brave attempt, sticking your foot into the icy water through a soft spot in your world.

Dad was there too, almost daily, with candy bars and magazines. It seems that death brought you both closer to life for a time.

They were baffled by me. They were sure it was impossible that oxygen ran through me and that I could pronounce the most intricate of words. I'd told them about the Lady in White, and they nodded and smiled. *Helluva drug, eh kid?* I can see you nodding and smiling too:

“Angels live on Christmas trees! Don't be silly! Call your shrink!”

We are tied to the Infinite; the Great Equation that numbers dare not approach, the great *I Am*, the great *You Aren't*, the One who could crush us to dust with his baby toe but who kneels right beside us as we chase our days.

Stay on the surface of things Mother; you'll be safer there. But know that I shattered the surface that night. I swam deep and stumbled on life. It took me years to understand it, but perhaps that's part of the mystery of it all. Some lessons are stretched across many miles, like fine wine; time being the only true mark of quality. Perhaps it's this mystery that has brought us both back together within these words.



Lighthouse | Nancy Syrett

Prophetess

Mitchell Krochmalnik Grabois

My aunt Della
a socialist organizer
ran afoul of mob bosses
who ran the city back then
There was also a sex scandal
The fiery-haired young Irishwoman
naturally got the blame

She was sent out West
that huge depository
to live with family friends
until things settled

The Earth spun
people lost track of each other
We later heard she'd kept agitating
rallied the natives on the Rez to rise up and
lose their chains

Persuasive she was in leather
with fiery hair and pale skin
large breasts narrow waist

but the natives took her metaphors literally
brought her the few rusty chains they used in their work
a pitiful pile in front of her cabin door

Believing in her as the latest
in a line of prophets
they waited for their world
to be healed

Corel Lies in Canada

Eldon (Craig) Reishus

OTTAWA, 21DEC'13. You won't believe what a sweet old lady said to me over her asparagus with great asperity from three tables down just yesterday: »Stop staring at me!«

The entire restaurant froze into a snapshot of itself from the turn before the last turn of the century. I rose from my seat and cleared my throat, suffering from my usual... well let's simply call it, them... *believability issues*. »First of all,« I said, »I was not staring at you—I was merely regarding you out the corner of my eye.«

The edges of the sweet old woman's mouth soured.

»And second of all, I was imagining nothing delinquent nor morally reprehensible—quite to the contrary: I work as a filters higher-up at Corel and was picturing the you of some sixty years prior standing over a corncob griddle wearing a girdle in a sepia image severely silvered by the vicissitudes of inapt fixer.«

The restaurant hush, considering the merits of my plea, heightened into an intelligent murmur. It was as if Christmas had received a number of packages from Easter,

but the return address read *Claus*. Following some short deliberation, the majority of tables indeed conceded Easter an additional Claus, why not, but included in their judgment the clause that the Easter Claus not carry Santa as a first name. No, like with the alternating sexes of Canadian high-pressure zones, the Claus of Easter must be female. Barbie was the name quickly suggested, seconded, and unanimously approved—Barbie Claus.

The sour corners of the sweet old woman's lips sanctified.

»Oh, I'm so terribly sorry«, she said. »A filters higher-up from Corel considering me re-rendered! How flattering! Please, you must forgive me...«

The sweet old woman's sanctified smile puckered into a handsomely blown kiss.

The restaurant exploded!

In the excitement, the trout on my plate blew its nose on my khakis.

»But you must explain this girdle-griddle image to me,« the sweet old lady, you must believe me, continued. »Where does it come from?«

My napkin dabbing at the lemon dill sauce roped beside my barn-door, I approached the sweet old lady's table. She

was seated with an elderly man—Bob Arrends, I quickly learned, the originator and long-time host of *Bob Arrends' Bowling for Canadian Dollars*. All three of us, discounting where our hands had ever been, shook hands. The sweet old lady, who had been a two-time losing contestant on Bob's matinee show, which ran from 1957 to 1971, and had dished out something in the incredible neighborhood of 3,750,000 Canadian dollar winnings, I quickly learned, repeated her wish to grasp more about the girdle-griddle image origins.

»As a child«, I explained, my napkin stubbing, stabbing, stubbing ruefully beside my zipper, »I secretly paged through the *Canadian Ladies Home Journal* to see if its pages were fortified with any glorified peeks at women meant for the eyes of women only. Sadly, the *Journal* was mostly stocked with appalling articles about wearing the right hair-do to the correct social engagement, smoking reindeer meat in retired combination freezer-refrigerators, how the large ferries of Nova Scotia are ferried, plus detailed accounts of making non-flammable tinsel at home. Bored, I would fan my long hair over some dark, full-page ad in quest of dandruff, then, using my index finger as a magic wand, reshape the white flakes into scenes such as *Woman In a*

Girdle Standing Over a Corncob Griddle. I didn't realize it at the time, but what I was doing was grooming myself for my future career as an image filters higher-up at Corel. Twice Adobe has attempted to lure me away—but U.S. officials won't allow me into their country.«

»Why's that?« Bob Arrends wanted to know.

»Well... let's simply call it, then... *believability issues.*«

»I don't believe a f*****g word,« Bob Arrends said, unbelievably.

I asked Bob Arrends whether he was disappointed that the restaurant didn't have a VIP section, where he could be corded off accordingly.

»Absolutely.«

»Me too.«

»Well, I think it's just wonderful that your mother could afford a subscription to the *Journal*,« the sweet old lady said, the twinkle in her eyes reminding the children at the neighboring tables of Easter's added meaning owing to Barbie Claus. »But you should have considered reading the articles with household tips. There you would have learned that it's a frightfully bad idea to rub lemon dill sauce into khakis. You would have known to go at it at once with salt.«

We shook hands all around, this time picturing ahead to where, shortly, mine would be repairing. I returned to my table hoping that it was not too entirely late to have a new penitent go at my trousers mishap. »Help me Barbie Claus.« I invoked. »Transmogrify the salt into the KPT Goo filter.« Plus then I remembered the magic word: »Please®™.«

The sweet old lady extended a joke in my direction. I could not understand a thing, but, standing at my table grinding the salt into my trout snot, I got her joke much better than did any of the other diners—me, you must believe me, laughing the loudest, me, you must believe me, finishing long even after Bob Arrends (Second Place).

Lipstick Thursday

Jessie Nash

“I’d rather be myself. Myself and nasty. Not somebody else, however jolly.” —Bernard Marx, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

people say
that things are changing,
because it’s 1965,
and my friend Derek,
this older guy I know,
he’s eighteen,
he said, people like you,
and I said
people like *us* you mean
and give him a sickly sweet grin,
and he looks a bit mean,
yeah, people like *me*
need to go where it’s happenin’,
the big cities,
and I joked around
and asked him what with
and how, and let’s go now,
and we planned it all out
about this bus journey
to New York,
or hitchhiking
and how we’d get some money
and all the boys and men
we’d meet
and how no one would beat us up,
beat *me* up,

because no one touches Derek
with their fists,
just my mouth and his girlfriend,
he's such a respectable young man—
so respectable he liked me to wear lipstick,
the same shade as his girlfriend,
pale petal pink, stolen from the old drugstore,
and he put it on me
so sloppy in the woods,
painting me in the dark,
because there was nowhere else
nowhere light, nowhere for us.

The first time
I didn't know,
I didn't know what to do
when he touched me,
I really believed we were going
out there just to drink liquor secretly,
we sang hymns together
on sundays,
I watched him play ball
on mondays,
and he sees Jenny
on wednesdays and fridays,
and me, he saw me
on thursdays,
he let me suck him off
on thursdays,
he came in my mouth
on thursdays,
I kissed his mouth but only once
on a thursday, lipstick thursday,
he was leaning against a tree,

my knees in the familiar dirt,
I stood up after I swallowed,
zipped him up and smiled
my lipstick smeared like my mothers,
pushing my lips onto his,

his fist fit suddenly so well
in the hollow of my cheek,
the blood moved from my dick
to my face
and his spit and the word “faggot,”
ran down my cheek and my tears
smeared him into the shadow of my pop,
fell to my knees in the familiar dirt
and howled with the shock,
it was worse than every locker room joke,
every cigarette burn, every time
they didn’t want me on their team
because they said I was a sissy,
every kick in the balls,
every time my mother said,
I should have been born a girl
because I liked to read books and dream,
every big daddy slap to the side of my face
with his hard thick hands,

and Derek said
*Rake, I’m not a faggot,
you might be, but I ain’t
you hear that? I ain’t.*

He named me Rake
the summer I shot up real fast,
and I lean my head against the cool window
of this bus

and try to imagine
it's him raking his stubby fingers
through my hair as he pushes my head
down, all the way down,
in the darkness of a tunnel
we drive until it's light,
and even though I hate him
I still burn for him,
I read the book he gave me,
Brave New World,
the last one he gave me,
older than the rest, the Beats,
the banned, things so different
than our sacred Sunday scripts,
and I don't think he's so brave,
and now it's New York Friday,

I left my mom and dad a note
in pale petal pink
above the sink and in the cracks
where my pop smashed my head
into the bathroom mirror
after forcing me to look
at my lipstick thursday lips
still smeared when I came home a wreck
forgetting I was branded with more than blood,
I hadn't wiped it off my sissy mouth
and then.
at the cigarette burn on my dick
it took all his buddies
to help him be a real man on that one,
hold down his sinning faggot son,
his abomination in the eyes of some god

and when I kicked out and got old Johnny in the balls
they punched mine
until I barfed,
and then they burned
and then they laughed.

The note I left said
fuck you
and I stole pop's wallet,
even though there wasn't much in it,
there was enough for a ticket
and Derek,
Derek, I wish you could have come
not gone home to Jenny, your god, your mom,
because I'm scared to do this
on my own,
but people like me,
people like me
need to go where it's happenin',

think of all the boys
and men I'll meet.

Travels with Great-Aunt Love

Sam Grieve

On the last night of our holiday, or vacation as my aunt kept referring to it, two men had a fight in the bar.

This is how it always goes with my aunt. Brawls, duels, fisticuffs—she adores them all. As long as it is over a woman, and as long as she can be there, egging them on from the sidelines in a too-short dress, her face clenched up with pleasure, and her eyes, those unforgettable eyes, enraptured, bright.



Love has not come easy to me. A broken heart, two failed marriages, a one-night stand or two—all mistakes. I blame it on my family and the gamut of ghastly relatives who despoiled my dreams. Take my great-aunt, for example, who in this story I have named Love, for irony's sake.

Great-Aunt Love is a sly old thing—the most devious of mothers-in-law and the ultimate homewrecker. In reality

we are distantly related, she and I, sort of third cousins, but in a family with such a great diaspora these things cease to matter. Blood is all that counts.

Since she is older than I, I call her Aunt. It was she who tacked on the Great, thinking, I imagine, that it was honorific (she has never gained a good grasp of nuance). We barely keep in touch. Writing letters is not our thing, and while I am always relieved to know she is still around, I also dread our meetings, for my aunt is a bully. She is also, as luck would have it, both peripatetic and forgetful. I doubt she remembers I am alive, most of the time; so busy is she circumnavigating the globe in search of fun. But occasionally, nostalgia grips her, and then she drops me a line—usually a scrawled postcard, ink shuddering over the page.

Lovely girl, she might scribble. In Japan. Spent a day with two brothers, Akio and Kato. They covered me in honey and rolled me in cherry blossoms. And then always, I miss you!!!

Or: Spending a few weeks with the Inuit. Had very cold feet but been thoroughly warmed up by Akycha, a local fisherman. You should meet him!!!



The last time I saw Great-Aunt Love was in 1969, when she invited me to join her in Miami. She was insistent; she hadn't seen me for absolutely AGES, she told me over the phone—and even across the transatlantic cable, I could hear the emphasis of her trademark capitalizations.

“Love,” I told her, “I am working. I can't just up and leave. And, moreover, I don't want to go on holiday with you. You'll pull some trick.”

“You are always working!” whined my aunt. “And it does make you DULL. Imagine what you could be if you weren't always glued to those boring old BOOKS?”

“Homeless?” I suggested. “Penniless?”

“Pshaw.” Great-Aunt Love was American now, truly transcended, for unlike me who has to fight against my mortal tin ear, she can adapt with ease.

“Look, honey,” she shivered down the line, “I promise I'll behave. I just want to see you! And you know what the climate in England does to my hair. I have booked us into a swell hotel. On the beach. And don't you dare say no.” And with that, she hung up.

Around two weeks later, a manila envelope fell through my door. I was on my way to work so I placed it on the mantelpiece, intending to open it later. But that night I

stopped at Foyles, and when I got home with the new John Fowles, I had totally forgotten about the letter. It was not until three days had gone by, that, glancing up from breakfast, I caught a glimpse of it, the long line of unfamiliar stamps down the side, my current name and address scribbled in crayon all over the front. I slit the envelope open. Inside it were an airline ticket and a brochure for a fancy hotel. *Three swimming pools!* The brochure exclaimed. *Golf! Tennis! Cocktails!*

Upon reading this, I will admit that most of me subsided as though my bones had caved in on themselves. America? Could I really do it? Fly over that immensity of sea and go somewhere new? A place where you were free to be whomsoever you desired. It seemed almost sacrilegious in its courage. And to my surprise I wanted it.

But there was a downside—a week with my maddening aunt. With her overfilled suitcases, her piles of makeup, her flibbertigibbet mind, her drenching perfume. How she insists on French braiding my hair and painting my nails. And how she drags me out to bars, parading me, as I have accused her before, like a procuress with her wares.

But America? On an aeroplane?



To the amazement of the head librarian, I requested a holiday. And a day off to go shopping. I bought sandals, two dresses, gloves, a new hat, sunglasses, and even a bathing suit with a discreet gauze skirt that fell halfway down my thighs. I spent a day at the American embassy getting a visa from an official who made his way through the blank pages of my passport with a slippery finger that he kept remoisturizing in his mouth.

“Welcome to America, Miss Smith,” he finally announced, with a decisive stamp.

A week later I caught a Pan American flight from London to Miami. The airhostess ascertained early on that I was new to flying. She gave me a newspaper and a stiff drink before takeoff, which I consumed hurriedly, the liquid soaking into my blood as the plane tore down the runaway and groaned into the sky. Before lunch she folded out a table, which lay miraculously concealed within the arm of my chair and covered it like a bride with a white cloth, and served me another drink. I held the glass against my lips and let my teeth clink against the rim as I stared out of the window. The plane shuddered in the air, dipped, one

wing down like gliding egret in flight so that all I could see from my window was a patch of sky, a patch of sea.

I slept then and dreamed of Icarus, plummeting through the air in a wake of feathers.



Great-Aunt Love stood in the arrivals hall. I had not seen her in years, but she was instantly recognizable; her face-lifts do not work on me. Her hair was blond and flowed down her back, and she wore platform shoes that brought her chin several inches above the crown of my head. A pair of orange flared pants hugged her legs and a white shirt tied around her waist revealed a good few inches of golden midriff.

“Aunt,” I said, reaching up to kiss her. “Aren’t you a bit old for that look?”

“Aren’t you a bit young for yours?” She retorted and then burst into peals of laughter.

She tucked her arm through mine as we waited for the bags. A few men glanced over at us. I adjusted my glasses, uneasy, but to my surprise my aunt seemed unaware of them.

“Do you really think I am showing my age?” She finally inquired as we followed a porter out into the sultry air. I had a good look at her—the peachy skin, the valley between her breasts where a tiny gold conch shell hung suspended on a chain. Twenty-two I would have guessed, maximum. “Suppose not,” I conceded.

Love opened her purse and popped a large ambrosial sweet into her mouth. “You, however, look very drab, my dear,” she lisped through lacquered lips.



You have all met my aunt, but you may not have known it, for she is a mistress of disguise. Her wardrobe is immense. I can see it now, in my mind’s eye, an Ali Baba’s cavern of glittering shoes, Belgian lace thongs, push-up bras, teensy tennis skirts, and evening gowns split to the thigh. Crystal bottles of scent lie scattered about, amongst powder puffs, hair curlers, red satin slips, garter belts, and tubes of lipstick. She has mirrors too, backlit, front-lit, magnifying, silver-backed, and even an exquisite gilt gesso one, filched from the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. She is as vain as peacock, my aunt, and utterly self-centered.

How would you know if you have seen her, you might ask? Well, she is everywhere: She is the harlot, the strumpet, the blushing bride, the striptease artist lowering her stockings over a slender knee. She is the guy in the supermarket who catches your eye; she is the whistle in the wind, the pinch on the bum, the stolen kiss, the pixilated porn on the Internet. She is the woman across the room you only get a glimpse but who leaves in you that immutable feeling that tonight is your night. She is the vixen who struts through your dreams in her fishtail skirt. She is the seductress you know you could be if only you could find the right heels. She is lust and desire and consummation, and it is she who makes this great world spin.



And yet, to my amazement, we got on well. After our initial jibes at the airport, we were gentle with each other. I held the door for her; she picked up her towels off the bathroom floor. Our room was five flights up, and after we had unpacked, I opened the window and stared out at the sea. Violet clouds lay like spattered paint on the horizon.

Love came over and for short while, we stood shoulder to shoulder, looking at the view. Then, in a small voice, she said, “I’ve missed you, Miss Smith.”

Our days settled into a routine. I would go for an early-morning walk along the beach while Love snoozed in bed. By the time I got back, she would be in the shower, and together we would go downstairs for a breakfast of coffee, orange juice, maple-cured bacon, and sunny-side up eggs. I tried everything; this was new fare for me, but my aunt refused it all, except for a cup of coffee, which she preceded with a cigarette. And no one appeared to notice us, despite our odd appearance; me, slightly plump in my linen trousers and sensible shoes; Love sporting a gold lamé bathing suit, crystal-studded high heels, armloads of jewelry, a purple headscarf, and gigantic sunglasses.

After breakfast we lay at the pool. The surface of the water scintillated like broken glass, the air was heady with jasmine, and even when the cabana boy emerged to arrange the cushions, my aunt did not look up from her *Vogue*.

“You know,” I finally told her. “This is lovely.”

“I did give you my word.” Love tipped onto her hip and ran a slow finger down my forearm. My own face, mirrored in her glasses, peered back at me, sun-peeled nose

protruding from beneath reading glasses and hat. “What you reading?”

“It is called a book.” I smiled.

“Am I in it?”

“Have you actually ever read a book?”

My aunt stuck out her tongue, then flopped back with her eyes closed. “I read one once.”

“*The Kama Sutra*?”

“I wrote that!”

We both giggled, although I suspected this was probably no false claim. Above us the sky was a blue I never saw in London. A dog careered across the lawn, his lambent tongue curling from the side of his black lips. My entire body felt heavy with heat. Even with my eyes closed, I saw the sun, but its brilliance was eclipsed by another light, a blinding blur on my right.

The white-hot aura of my aunt.



Of course, it was not all perfect. I am accustomed to a single life. Her constant flicking through magazines or her preoccupation with her compact, in which she could

engage herself for hours, irritated me. And, inevitably, I cramped her style too. While I swam, my aunt would sneak off to inveigle her way between couples, fueling the air around them with her special brand of want. And in the afternoon, when I returned to the room to escape the heat, she was left to mischief on the scalding sand. That little time apart, however, kept us both sane. In the evening we would head downstairs for a quiet supper or even order room service, companionably eating cross-legged on the bed in front of the television.

And then on Friday, the winds changed.

At breakfast I was punished with a scowl when I asked for the sugar, and instead of filling the morning with her usual prattle she lay sullen on the sun-lounger. By mid-afternoon my feeling of unease had grown; I went inside to escape both the sun and her. She returned, at six, and slammed the door.

“Aunt?” I said.

“Miss Smith.” Her tone was cool. “I am absolutely bored.”

“But Aunt...”

“So bored. And I am not good when I am bored.”

This was true. I sat up and turned back the page of the book I was reading. “It is only one more day, Love,” I reminded her. “I fly back to London tomorrow night. And then you are free to do your thing, and I will go back to the library and do mine. We can make it until then, can’t we?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “You could at least give me one night,” she said. “After all I have done for you. Paid for your ticket, this place.”

My breath faltered. “Love! You can’t just change the rules like that!”

“I can change any rule I like.”

“Oh, Aunt...”

For a moment she stood there glaring at me, and then she threw herself onto her bed and faced the opposite wall. I lay still and listened to the ominous hum of the air conditioner. My aunt might have been carved from stone.

“You don’t understand,” she said, finally, in a quiet voice. “You never have. I would have given you anything you wanted. You know that, don’t you? You were always my favorite. Why do you make it so difficult for me?”

“What are you talking about?” I was on my feet now, my heart beating a violent tattoo in my chest. Love lay

curled up like a truculent teenager, her hair fanning above the white curve of her neck.

“You know what I mean.” She still refused to look at me. “All those gorgeous boys I have sent your way. But not a word of thanks from you. Not once. Not even for Alexander who, quite frankly, was sublime. Even then you were miserable, locking yourself up in that ghastly little room and never washing your hair, like some sort of hideous fortune teller.”

“I did wash my hair!” I interjected.

“Not enough,” she snapped. “You don’t know how hard it is for me. How upset you make me. Here I am, all generosity, and what are you? A selfish spoiled frigid wretch. If I didn’t adore you quite so much, I would disown you.”

I sat down on her bed and picked up a shimmering curl, the heat of it searing my fingers. “Alexander was a long, long time ago.” I whispered to her. “I am sorry about that, but you must remember—I make my own decisions. But if you want to go out just one last time, I will come along. But, dear Aunt, absolutely no gifts.”



Bill Buckey had recently returned from the war. I knew this because he told me, but I had surmised it already from the defeated expression on his face. He approached me as I sat in a dark corner of the bar, my handbag over my arm, and my eye on Aunt Love, who perched on the arm of a chair beside the dance floor, her bare legs crossed at the thigh.

Bill offered me a drink. He was short but broad across the shoulders, his hair shaved malignantly close to his scalp. I took an instant dislike to him; he was too much like my first husband, but before I could refuse him, he leaned over the bar and held up two fingers.

“Jack ‘n’ soda.”

Then, and with a nervous precision as though he was surprised at himself for remembering this common courtesy, he pulled out a chair for me at a nearby table.

I have known many men like Bill Buckey, rough, arrogant, but also persecuted; men who have been shipwrecked by the very world they placed their faith in. Bill’s eyes were the color of all the swamps he had waded through in the jungle; and as he spoke, delicate beads of sweat, like tiny pearls, emerged from the scant red stubble on his forehead. He was home but his soul, I soon came to

see, had remained in Vietnam. He would start to tell me something, but after a few seconds, his voice would gutter out, and his slightly protruding eyes would flicker around the room as though he could no longer recall where he was.



It was Bill who started the fight with the Cuban. Bill, who, with several whiskies searing through his veins, had annexed me, planted his flag over the territory of my body.

The Cuban, on the other hand, was young and lustrous-haired. His shoes were polished like stars, and he wore the top buttons of his shirt undone so the glint of his crucifix gleamed against the *dulce de leche* of his skin. He was just my aunt's sort. She sat up when he walked in, and you felt it immediately: a sea change in the air.

With Love in the room, swaying her hips beneath the mirrored ball on the dance floor, my disguises were useless. I could not hide. I could not be Miss Smith. My white gloves, the prim lace collar of my shirt, the motherly pillbox hat, even they looked enticing. Every woman became a dream, and every man too. Under Love's spell,

the night took on an enchanted air; she blew in a salt-laden breeze from the ocean, suspended a milky moon in the sky.



What did they see in me when Auntie unleashed her power? What did Bill glimpse when his meandering gaze fell for a moment into my eyes? The Vietnamese woman, perhaps, with her satiny mound of pubic hair with whom he had lain only weeks before. She had straddled him like a dream, the tiny plum coins of her nipples so stiff, they seemed to have been sewn onto the pouches of her breasts, and who, when he had cried, had wiped away the tears with a child-size finger.

And Carlos? Who was he remembering? A girl back home, swaying her hips up the dirt track toward church? Or Mr. Van Loren's flaxen daughter who pushed herself up from the country club pool with wiry arms, her streaming hair the color of her skin?

Aunt Love, the Great Flirt, Mistress of Betrayal, with her sideways glances, her unspoken promises, jiggled on the dance floor. Great-Aunt Love was making flirts of all of us,

even if we did not want it, for this was Love's delight; this is what she does.



The fight started when Bill came back from the bar and discovered Carlos and I dancing; a cha-cha, his hand on my back guiding me with effortless ease around the floor. I was enjoying myself, his deft feet, the warmth radiating from his skin, the smell of him—a spicy, clean scent that brought with it the drag of limes—the close promise of his mouth. Oh, it was my aunt's doing, I knew, but in that moment I had ceased to care. In his arms, I floated.

But Bill did not like his girl to be stolen, not the girl he had just laid claim to and especially not to a foreigner. When I went to the ladies' room, Bill got up from his seat and took his beer bottle with him. The Cuban was leaning against a wall, staring out at the beaten sea, a cigarette cupped in his hand. Bill considered hitting the Cuban right then and there, on the side of his gleaming black head, but something restrained him: a residue of his childhood, of his father, talking of a fair fight. To take on a man from behind is the coward's way, so instead he prodded the Cuban in

the small of his back with the bottle, hard, and said, “Who the hell do you think you are, you fucking monkey?”

Carlos had already spent time with Death and was not afraid of him. Three years back he had clung to a raft for a week between Cuba and Florida until his body was a dry bone and he could not open his mouth to drink, for the blisters on his lips had adhered together. He dropped his cigarette, ground it beneath the sole of his glinting shoe as though he were squashing a bug.

“You sure about this, man?” he said and pulled a knife out of his pocket. Turning on Bill, he exhibited it to him.

Bill eyed the blade. Eight inches long, with a wicked edge and an ornate handle, and not made in the US of A by the look of it. In his hand, the beer bottle suddenly felt inadequate, so Bill retreated and smashed the bottle down on the lip of a flowerpot. Amber stars cascaded in the air, and at the noise, men began to gather—some behind Bill, some behind Carlos. Bill waved his weapon, its sharp vitreous teeth.

I saw them from the balcony. Carlos squared his feet, hinged toward Bill; Bill mimicked him, and the two men circled each other. Carlos lunged first—he was defending his honor after all—and for a second, his blade fell through

the air toward Bill's chest. Bill sidestepped; the blade skimmed past. Now it was Bill's turn—he was enjoying this; you could see it in the strut in his step, the way he ran his free hand through the shorn mat of his hair. Round and around they went, and then Bill lashed out toward Carlos' face. Carlos ducked but Bill was ready. He clipped Carlos on the right ear with his left fist and then undercut him again in the stomach, and the younger man crumpled to the floor, losing his grasp on his knife. Bill grabbed him and started to pull him off the dance floor, dragging him by the gold chain of his crucifix. Carlos kicked out uselessly. Strangled by his chain, his face deepened in color, and I saw the panic in his eyes.

But Love stepped in. The chain snapped.



What did she do with him? I don't know, for I left. Suspecting something like this, I had packed my bag and stored it with the bellman in the lobby. After her coup, Love would be so excited, she was probably not thinking clearly. Carlos would have already been transported to the sheets of my bed. She would be fawning over him,

smothering him with Shalimar, smoothing his slights with her nimble fingers, the tambourine jingle of bedecked arms. I raced down the stairs, my shoes in my hand, and ordered a cab for the airport. Once there I checked into a hotel and stayed well hidden before my flight the next day. But Great-Aunt Love never tracked me down. Perhaps she regretted what she had done, her deceit, but we never spoke again. I did write her a thank-you letter, but since I did not know where to send it, I put it in my desk drawer, where it remains to this day.



Bleeding Heart | Kathleen Gunton

Ghazal: References to (Tracee Ellis Ross) Make Me Hot Kenny Fame

Hair layered in more feathers than coconut cake on the After-Sunday Church Service table. Gotta love those natural's though: kinks, curls

and them—afros... Piled higher than the meringue on Sister Robinson's sweet potato pie. Portrait filled with lime. Branches curl

'round church windows. Leaving nothing to the imagination. Nothing. I guess it ain't for everyone. I sit back and curl

my locks, 'round my right index finger, like a teething puppy's jaws. Throw my head back until I am right side up. Spit. Curl

up my lips, as if I just sucked on a large sour pickle. Then I loudly and proudly kiss the root of my wisdom tooth. Mama said *Curl-*

y hair ain't for everybody Kenny; but... neither are those tired muffin top wigs, that the church elders be rockin'. Cue Curls.

Emily Dickinson Just Walked By My Window

John Bruce

Emily Dickinson just walked by my window,
only she wore tie-dye and smoked a spliff.
Her steps weaved her body sound waves,
treading barefoot, as a swift walking stick sister.

Her white dress was splattered with colors
(clown wig orange, secret society red, fluid blue, mind massaging
green, blast-off purple, corn kernel under lamplight yellow).
It was bold to any eye in an outside world,
and blinding to prisoners living within the walls of house and garden.

Emily kissed her spliff
(like she had known all along that it could be this good)
as she strode, slicing the air,
inhaling the response to her letter to the world.

I had never read any of her work.
But there she was, right there through my window,
stoned and strolling the Earth, with ancient tie-dye in her wake.
Her hair flooded from her scalp in dance,
no longer worn as a battle garment to protect her tender brain.

Severance Songs by Joshua Corey.
North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2011.
\$16.95. 84 pages. ISBN: 978-1-932195-92-7.
Reviewed by Lindsay Illich.

Chosen by Ilya Kaminsky for Tupelo Press's Dorset Prize, Joshua Corey's *Severance Songs* reinterprets the sonnet form. What is a sonnet in the world of *Severance Songs*? A poem of fourteen lines, a meditation or prayer, a flash of ether fitted with internal and feminine rhymes. There are moments of grandeur, and importantly, fealty to the art of poetry and print culture.

Those two interests—the craft of poetry and the culture of the book—resonate with the history of the form, especially with Shakespeare's sonnets. Without such resonance, it would be difficult for the poems (discretely) to rescue the volume from the marring gimmickry of the affect. Like Corey's sonnets, Shakespeare's were published after it was in fashion to be writing sonnets (Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* was published in 1591, eighteen years before Shakespeare's volume). Sort of like, say, recording a disco track in the 90's: it only works if it says something significant about the disco form itself and uses the form to interrogate larger cultural forms. In the case of Shakespeare's sonnets, print technology fostered a birth power for publishing authors (a shift from the earlier ways copies were disseminated in manuscript culture). In the sonnets, male pregnancy, parthenogenesis, becomes a metaphor for writing, and oddly, print technology begins to take root in theories of sexual reproduction (spermatozoa *imprinting* on the egg). If you're interested in more along these lines, Wendy Wall's *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* is excellent.

Thinking through the hood of print culture becomes a habit of seeing in Corey's poems. Fingers "recede/ like serifs in the downfaced book" (3). A snagged syntax that sort of blank rhymes early modern verse by way of subject-object-verb: "O, I could a tale unfold whose lightest word—/ scald my fathering eyes young again, miss taking them." Neologisms abound, as if the lexicon must explode to contain the ungainly misery of a dying planet.

Whereas in Shakespeare's sonnets giving birth becomes a metaphor for authorship, in Corey's sonnets, the earth has been emptied out, partly, we are to understand, from the logic that grew out of the pathetic fallacy. We have projected so long on the earth our own desires and failings that it has become commodity, and so being, it has itself the bearing of the aborted: "Let's stash snowballs/ in our pockets. Heart of winter water/ under ducks, gingerly./ You a third through and me your happy middle,/ me a little lost in the furl of your paper thrum./ Oh, "you."/ A Blue coil, red luminance, sparrow thronging/ in a bush/ teeming in leafless brawl. Let's December/ the old magenta, let's petal your uppermost grin."

In the last poem, the speaker is Prospero, and I suppose we are to understand that everything is ending—not just *The Tempest* or Corey's *Severance Songs* but every *thing* and thought. Our consolation (or consolation prize, so to speak): "severance/ doesn't end once love itself comes home/ though reaching builds on reaching the fallible poem."

King of the Class by Gila Green.
Vancouver: Now or Never Publishing, 2013.
\$19.95. 237 pages. ISBN: 978-1-92694-214-8
Reviewed by Julie Anne Levin.

In her gripping and heartfelt first novel, *King of the Class*, Gila Green sets a timeless tale of love and religion in a politically and technologically futuristic Israel. Among cyber pets and hoverboards, a self-proclaimed nonreligious woman, Eve, is guided by supernatural connections through a plot maze that includes a difficult marriage and her only son's disappearance. Tapping deeply into the experience of motherhood, Green's most moving moments depict a mother's relationship to her unborn child's soul and, then, to her young son. The story also convincingly examines the sometimes healthy and sometimes disturbing sacrifices parents make to serve their children.

This fast-paced novel is set in an Israel in which the two-state solution refers not to Israel and Palestine (a situation only briefly mentioned in the book), but to the conflict of secular and religious Jews within Israel. In the first captivating pages, Eve wakes to find that her beloved fiancé has left her to delve deeper into Judaism and become a rabbi. He presses her to embrace his orthodox lifestyle while she is haunted by a ghost-like figure also influencing her to accept the existence of a higher power. Eve's decisions are far from being fictionally optimistic, and instead Green accurately portrays the human tendency to fulfill one's own happiness by not being a disappointment to others. The isolation and doubt felt in each of Eve's passing thoughts is a heart-wrenching tribute to anyone

struggling with his or her identity in a religion, as a parent, and as a citizen in a country defined by clash.

The bleak future of Israel painted in this account creates a feeling of immediacy to solve the current dilemmas without giving rise to Green's predicted outcomes. In Green's words, we must "realize that everything is as temporary as it is forever... A small act we perform thoughtlessly today, a careless word uttered can affect generations. At the same time, we must not bear grudges, we must put the bad behind us and say it's over, that was then." Eve's personal journey includes her own conflicted understanding of the complicated political situation and her place as a student, sister, wife, and mother in a country constantly plagued by some level of civil strife. The characters surrounding Eve represent different levels of observance, but they are not mere caricatures of their sacred and secular beliefs. Rather, Green portrays even the most dark of them affectionately and without religious or political stereotypes, and allows each to be unmistakably human, with flaws and desires that flaunt and defy their stated principles.

Without question, the artistry of Green's writing is most apparent in the beautiful delicacy she uses to develop the relationships between the mothers and their sons. She weaves a telepathic connection between them, which serves as help and hindrance in the face of tragic circumstances. It does not, however, feel forced or magical. Rather, it naturally appears as the deeply personal communication that all mothers strive for with their children. Her own experience as a mother and Israeli immigrant makes the story touchingly personal and powerfully compelling.

The final one hundred pages of *King of the Class* leave the reader breathless and shaken. Suddenly and strangely, characters who have been shadows in the early plot development are the main players in averting a bitter nightmare. This artful arrangement of motivation and purpose adds to the suspense and takes the reader on a frightening discovery into the nature of hope, despair, and the lengths to which people go for personal gain. Ultimately, however, the intricate plot allows the main characters to find redemption in what is simply a true love story. The story wraps back around as Gila Green effortlessly expresses an unimaginable depth of understanding for her characters and how they realistically face extraordinary circumstances. That is the skill that defines her style as an author and leaves a lasting impression and anticipation for her future storytelling.

Running at Night by Ned Randle.
Seattle: Coffeetown Press, 2013.
\$10.95. 106 pages. ISBN: 978-1-60381-164-4
Reviewed by Theodosia Henney.

Running at Night is Ned Randle's full-length poetry debut and spans his collected work from 1976 to 2012. While certain elements of the author's style visibly evolve when looked at chronologically, the consistency of Randle's voice throughout the decades is remarkable, acting as a paved road over diverse and frequently rocky terrain—from domestic abuse to courtship to Abraham Lincoln.

At their best, Randle's poems evoke a connection with the land that reads as true and absolute. He solidifies the thoughts and lives of imagined earlier inhabitants with grace and empathy, such as in his series "The Illinois Poems": "There must have been something untoward/ about the great Mississippi River/ to put fear inside a heart which// had never known such fear before...// we stood upon the high bluff to/ stare, as each hand-hewn raft carried our// friends with their futures across the rapid/ waters."

While some of the poems lean towards abstract self-interest, the majority show a sharp attention to the outside world, both in regards to human relations as well as those of humans to their environment. For this reader, many of the best moments come in brief, clean lines thrown straight as a jab, as in the final stanza of "Reply to the Invitation to Hunt": "The poem has not yet been born with/ the strength of a ten point buck."

While *Running at Night* addresses a number of subjects and dips into the lives of various characters, both real and imagined, the book has a settled consistency of tone and pace that clears a way for readers to navigate an expansive world of corners and hills. And readers may find themselves compelled onward, much like the runner in the titular poem, by the steadiness of Randle's composition—"He rounds the rosebush planted on/ the edge of concrete and returns to/ make pace with the selfless sounds of night."



Brooklyn B&W | Peggy Acott

BIOS

Peggy Acott still remembers the little gray plastic Kodak camera she bought for eight dollars when she was a girl. That camera is long gone, but she insists on keeping the first (and only) SLR film camera she replaced it with—a no-frills Pentax that was with her to her college Art degree, to Ireland, through her son’s well-documented early-childhood and into the midst of the digital age. She loves the freedom and immediacy of digital photography, but still thinks watching an image emerge on the paper in a darkroom tray is nothing short of magic.

Cath Barton is a writer, photographer and singer who lives in South Wales. She aims to remain surprising, even to those who know her best. Visit www.blipfoto.com/cathaber to see her daily photograph.

Allie Marini Batts is an MFA candidate at Antioch University of Los Angeles, meaning she can explain deconstructionism, but cannot perform simple math. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize. Her chapbook, *You Might Curse Before You Bless* was published in 2013 by ELJ Publications. Find her on the web: <https://www.facebook.com/YouMightCurseBeforeYouBless>

Melanie Browne is a poet and fiction writer living in Texas with her husband and three children. Her work can be found around the web.

John Bruce has published poetry, articles, [songs](#) and essays. He completed his studies in English Literature from the University of California at Santa Cruz and teaches high school English Literature in Mexico City. He is currently working on translations of Latin American literature, and aside from writing, he enjoys playing guitar, hiking, travel, and collecting masks. You can read his article, “[Nature is a Language We Need to Read](#)“ online.

Susana H. Case is a Professor and Program Coordinator at the New York Institute of Technology. She is the author of: *Salem In Séance* (WordTech Editions), *Elvis Presley’s Hips & Mick Jagger’s Lips* (Anaphora Literary Press) and *4 Rms w Vu* (Mayapple Press, forthcoming in 2014). Please visit her online at: <http://iris.nyit.edu/~shcase/>

Martha Clarkson writes fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, as well as shoots photos with multiple camera types. She receives mail in Kirkland, WA, or here: www.marthaclarkson.com

Logen Cure lives in Texas with her wife. Her work is featured or forthcoming in *Big River Poetry Review*, *Sundog Lit*, *Word Riot*, *Educe Journal*, and *Brusque Magazine*. She is the author of a chapbook, *In Keeping* (Unicorn Press, 2008). She earned her MFA in poetry from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Learn more at <http://www.logencure.blogspot.com/>

Kenny Fame is an African-American / GLBTQ poet who was born in Paterson, New Jersey. He currently divides his time between living & working in both London UK & NYC. He was a recent graduate of Cave Canem's 2011 & 2012 Poetry Conversations Workshop classes with poets Bakar Wilson & Kamilah Aisha Moon. As of 2013 Kenny Fame has added singer/songwriter to his list of accomplishments & he will be launching his own production company, focusing on his play-writing, songwriting & selected works of poetry. Kenny Fame is now a recording artist who goes under the name Levi. His song "Ain't No Biggie" is currently making its way up the Dance Charts.

Barbara Fletcher writes and takes photographs in Toronto, Canada. Her work has appeared in various forms of pixels (*nthposition*, *The Toronto Quarterly*, *Melic Review*) and print (*Grain*, *lichen*, *Other Voices*). She also runs [\[places for writers\]](#), an online writers' resource site.

Mitchell Krochmalnik Grabois was born in the Bronx and now splits his time between Denver and a one-hundred-and-twenty-year-old, one-room schoolhouse in Riverton Township, Michigan. His short fiction and poetry appears in close to two hundred literary magazines, most recently *The T.J. Eckleberg Review*, *Memoir Journal*, *Out of Our* and *The Blue Hour*. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, most recently for his story "Purple Heart," published in *The Examined Life* in 2012. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, published by Xavier Vargas E-ditions, is available for all e-readers for 99 cents through [Amazon](#), [Barnes and Noble](#) and [Smashwords](#). A print edition is also available through Amazon.

Sam Grieve was born in Cape Town and lived in Paris and London prior to settling down in Connecticut with her family. She has a BA from Brown University and an MA in English from King's College London, and has worked as a writer, librarian, bookseller and antiquarian book dealer. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *A cappella Zoo*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Wild Violet Literary Magazine*, *Sanskrit* and *PANK*. She has never lived in a home with enough bookshelves.

Kathleen Gunton believes one art feeds another. Her photography and poetry often appear in the same journal. Recent cover art for *Thema*, *Arts and Letters*, *Switchback*, *CQ*, and *Inkwell*. More of her work can be viewed online at *The Healing Muse Artist Gallery*.

Theodosia Henney is a circus enthusiast who thoroughly enjoys Shark Week. Her poems and flash-prose have appeared or are forthcoming in journals such as *Flyway*, *Stone Highway*, and *Squalorly*. She edits poetry here at *Cactus Heart*, and wants you to format your submissions correctly.

Jen Hinst-White recently completed her first novel, *Inklings*, the story of an aspiring female tattoo artist in the early 1980s. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Common Online*, *Big Fiction*, *HoldADoor.com*, and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars.

Lindsay Illich teaches writing at Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Texas Poetry Journal*, *Bluestem Quarterly*, *Buddhist Poetry Review*, *Coachella Review*, *Damselfly*, as well as *Hurricane*

Blues: How Katrina and Rita Ravaged a Nation and *Improbable Worlds: An Anthology of Texas and Louisiana Poets*. Online, her poetry has been featured by Occupoetry and Tupelo Press's 30x30 Project for January 2013.

Nancy Ryan Keeling is the author of the full-length collection of poetry *Estrogen Power*. An artist and photographer she has exhibited in the International Museum of Collage/Assemblage in Waco, TX, the Sam Houston Museum in Huntsville, TX, the Houston Art Car Museum & the Obsidian Art Space in The Heights, Houston, TX. Her photography has appeared in: *Calyx/Burner/RavenChronicles/Episodic/Furnace/Meadowland/South Loop/Southern Women's Review/Write from Wrong*.

Erren Geraud Kelly's work currently appears in *Vox Poetica*, *Ray's Road Review*, *Convergence*, *Radius* and in 80 other publications in print and online. Kelly is also the author of the chapbook *Disturbing The Peace*, on Night Ballet Press. Mr. Kelly received a B.A. in English Creative Writing from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Mr. Kelly lives in Chicago.

Julie Anne Levin is a middle school teacher who loves to read and write alongside her students. At home, she passes on her enjoyment of the literary arts to her two small children. Sometimes, between home and work, she finds the time to read and write for herself.

Connie Lopez-Hood is Editor & Co-Founder of Shuf Poetry and has also served as Editor for both the *Pacific Review* and *Ghost Town Literary Journal*. She spearheaded and edited the chapbook anthology, *Blankets & Other Poems: Poetry for the People of Japan*, in which all proceeds were

donated to Red Cross Japan Relief. Her work has appeared in *The Newer York*, *Apercus*, *Gaga Stigmata*, *Our Stories Literary Journal*, *Polari Journal*, *Lingerpost*, *Subliminal Interiors*, and others. She holds an MFA in Poetry and is obsessed with collaborative projects, such as her newest endeavor at www.musclesmadnessandmartinis.com. She lives, writes, and breathes poetry in the Southern California mountains with her poet-spouse, two artsy step-kids, and three wily rescue dogs.

Jessie Nash is a British writer and photographer. His fiction and poetry have appeared in many publications including *Glitterwolf*, *Wilde*, and *Lunchticket*. He is a fellow of the Lambda Literary Retreat for Emerging LGBT Voices. Jessie is a transman who identifies as queer.

Eldon (Craig) Reishus entertains a growing, less intimate circle beneath the Alps outside of Munich (Landkreis Bad Tölz - Wolfratshausen). An all-around web and print media pro, he originates from Fort Smith, Arkansas. Visit him: <http://www.reishus.de>

After retiring from the University of Kansas, **Elizabeth Schultz** spends her time as an arts and environmental advocate. She graduated from publishing scholarly books to writing poetry and essays on the environment about the places and people she loves.

After working as a carpenter in Kentucky, Louisiana, and Ohio, **Eric Schwerer** earned a PhD in Creative Writing from Ohio University. Prior to that, he received an MFA from The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Schwerer has taught poetry to people recovering from mental illness

and is an Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh-Johnstown.

Schwerer is the author of two books of poetry, *The Saint of Withdrawal* and *Whittling Lessons*. His poems have been published in many literary journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *NOR*, *Paper Street*, *Fence*, *The Journal*, *Diagram*, *Rhino*, *Northwest Review*, *Third Coast*, *Quarter After Eight*, *The Laurel Review*, *Artful Dodge*, *Beacon Street Review*, *Poems & Plays*, *Sonora Review*, and *Elixir*.

A poet and nonfiction writer, **Robin Silbergleid** is the author of the chapbook *Pas de Deux: Prose and Other Poems* (Basilisk Press, 2006). Recent work appears in *Hospital Drive*, *The Citron Review*, *Thin Air*, and elsewhere. She teaches at Michigan State University, where she directs the Creative Writing Program and serves as faculty adviser to *The Red Cedar Review*.

Jay Sims resides in Chatham, Ontario. He contributes extensively to local news publications as well as the blogosphere. He devours literature of all genres, his latest ventures being Leonard Cohen, Anne Rice and Winston Churchill. “Letters Home” is an excerpt from his full-length memoir, *Letters Home*.

Jon Svec was raised on a cherry farm in southwestern Ontario. He studied English at the University of Waterloo and currently works as a journalist in Saskatchewan. His stories have been published in *The Frequent and Vigorous Quarterly*, *EWB* and *The Story Shack* and are soon to appear in *Emerge Literary Journal*.

Nancy Syrett. Retired teacher and has worn many hats over the years. Child of the 60's, still believes in activism and volunteering; let peace begin with me. Dabbles in a variety of creative pathways; painting, music, writing and poetry, photography and crafts. Is at one with nature.

Graham Tugwell is an Irish writer and performer and recipient of the College Green Literary Prize 2010. His work has appeared in over seventy journals, including *Anobium*, *The Missing Slate*, *The Quotable*, *Pyrta*, *Jersey Devil Press*, *L'Allure Des Mots* and *Poddle*. He has lived his whole life in the village where his stories take place. He loves it with a very *special* kind of hate. His website is www.grahamtugwell.com

Ellen Webre is a youthful Californian with a labyrinth mind from years of art school. She dreams of the strange and bizarre, bringing them to life with words like puppets. She lurks in the dark and observes the world with affection, for she is everywhere and all the time. When she emerges into public view, it pleases her greatly to see her verbal tentacles tickle and creep upon the audience of her local poetry reading, the more reactions make for more delight. She can be contacted at lnwebre@yahoo.com

An admit to the 2013 Tin House Writer's Workshop and last summer's James D. Houston Scholar at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, **Hilary Zaid** has seen her short fiction recently published in *Educe Literary Journal*, *Glitterwolf* (UK), *theNewerYorkPress's* Electric Encyclopedia of Experimental Literature, *Crack the Spine* and *(T)OUR Literary Magazine*, and, forthcoming, in *Zymbol*. "Love Poison #9" is an excerpt from her novel *Paper Is White*.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to:

NewPages

Lambda Literary Review

Poets & Writers

Duotrope

[places for writers]

& all the friends, family, writers, and fellow Twitterers
who help spread the word.

& an extra big thank you to all the writers and artists
who submit their work—without you, *Cactus Heart* would
be nothing at all.



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