



# Cactus Heart

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# Cactus Heart

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# Editor's Note

Half the time I'm running around with an unruly to-do list ticking through my brain. I write half of it down, let the other half flicker like shades through my brain at odd hours. Midnight might find me rising from bed to soak the airplants; five a.m. might find me sudsing dishes from two days ago, composing an overdue book review as I rinse.

I've never been one for regularity or schedule—my brain, my heart, is too non-linear for that. I don't recommend this lifestyle to everyone. But, I'm settling in to a new apartment, living alone again, and I'm (re)discovering how I inhabit space, how I live in my home.

And I know I'm not the only one with home on the brain, because many of the pieces in Issue #9 talk about home in some manifestation or other—the city or town; the physical residence; the rooms we sleep and eat and love in; those people who feel, from the moment we meet them, like a safe place.

Summer's winding down in the Northern Hemisphere, and the days shorten, the darkness lengthens, and we draw inward. We sit in the small pools of light our lamps cast and we build lives. Us writers build rooms with our words—rooms that we live in, for a moment or two, rooms we offer to the world as evidence of our toils—and included here are a few, to inhabit, for a moment or two.

May the changing of leaves and the wild darkness find you peaceful; may you turn on the lamp in your heart and find a room there where words live—

Sara



Night Walk | Jhaki M.S. Landgrebe

# Laundry

## Jan Bindas-Tenney

You taught me about laundry. You resisted buying a clothes dryer, and also resisted going to the laundromat. Our back lawn in northern New Hampshire was a minefield of crab apples and hanging sheets like theater curtains, filling and deflating with the breeze. I sprinted through and burst out the other side like a bullfighter. That smell, lemon squeezed on a cold wet washcloth. In winter you hung blue jeans on the line despite the sheets of ice, and brought them in stiff and puffed, as if they puckered around invisible legs. We laughed and propped them up on the couch. When the snow piled too deep to manage a laundry basket, we filled the kitchen with wooden racks, laundry steaming in front of the wood stove.

You finally bought a dryer when an exchange student from Sweden named Lisa came to stay for six months and you worried that we were uncivilized. The dryer slid behind the tub upstairs and made a racket that filled the small house as it turned jean zippers in a centripetal acceleration.

Mom, we come from a long line of laundry dedicants.

Your mother taught you about laundry. When you were young you tried to pry a stuck sock from a 1940s clothes wringer and it mangled your thumb. You reached in with the wringer still turning and your thumb flattened and bloodied. They took pink skin from your leg and draped it across below the knuckle. I traced the scar with my finger and asked you to tell the story again. I vowed never to fish a sock from anything, never to stick a knife in a toaster while it was plugged in.

At the laundromat as 13-year-olds, my friends and I dared each other to curl our pre-pubescent bodies into a dryer and spin. The terror of getting stuck, of burning alive was too real. We hung around out back with the cardboard boxes and dumpsters, jumped on stones to cross the river to the elementary school playground. We swarmed from the school to the convenience store to the town common until the police came to scatter us.

You made me start doing my own laundry around this time. You said I used too many towels. I left towels in moldy heaps around my room, used a new one each day like I lived in a hotel. When I lied and stayed out all night, you dragged me out of school and threatened to send me away.

The laundromat was where the real poor people went and shook their heads at us badass kids, called the cops. Not poor

like the rest of us, scraping coins together for candy, but the families who came to school shivering and dressed in grungy sweaters. What separated us was the accessibility of clean socks.

At the time of the clothes wringer incident you were six or seven, living in New York, right after your mother came home from Pilgrim State Hospital where they locked her up for three years. She thought it was raining cats and dogs, but *really* raining them. She described a sky filled with frantic claw-spread kitties like flat parachutes sailing through the afternoon, and barking pups with floppy ears careening to the ground. They electric-shocked your mother, filled her with insulin until she grew weak and listless. The sugar drained from her blood as if they could give her an oil change.

Putting socks through the wringer was your Saturday morning chore. You stood on your tiptoes in the basement alone while your mother hung sheets in the wind. The clothes wringer taller than you, you reached that little thumb up to push the sock through. Your mother was in pretty good shape then after her hospital stay, undoubtedly overwhelmed, but not ill. It would be four years until her next break.

You didn't see your mother those three years while she stayed in the hospital. Your father went by himself on weekends.

You had a parade of “housekeepers” who washed your clothes and your sister’s cloth diapers.

I moved to New York, Mom. I wanted to be like you. I wanted to find the place you’re from. In Brooklyn, everyone went to the laundromat. In that section of Brooklyn, mostly Caribbean with some white hipsters, there were two laundromats: the 24-hour joint run by the grumpy lady in hair curlers and the one across the street that closed at 6 p.m. I went to the 24-hour one so I could go at midnight when it was quiet. Across the street the old Haitian ladies sat all day, washing, smiling and greeting each other in high-pitched French. Young women stacked bed sheets in the late night fluorescence like teetering towers of baby blocks. Half the washing machines were always broken, over-flowing suds all over the floor, and the kids slipping around, giggling. For years I tried to win the grumpy lady over, smiling hard when I bought the soap from her, but she wore headphones and barely looked up. Some of the women in there were very serious, standing up on step stools to dump glugs of pink softener from gallon bottles. They commandeered half a dozen washers at a time, filled them with rugs and comforters. And there were the men too, neatly folding t-shirts as they held leashes for fluffy white dogs below.

I wasn't so serious, mixing colors and never using softeners or dryer sheets. I carried dirty pants on my back in string bags three blocks down Nostrand Ave. I always went home in between: put the wash in, home to clean or read or eat a snack, then back again. I loved that envelope of time between the wash and the dry: a 30-minute recess. I always returned too late, after the timer buzzed. Sometimes people took my things out and loaded them into the wire basket or on top. But never gone, never stolen.

You told me that you've always loved doing laundry, but you never loved going to the laundromat. I always loved the laundromat, the quiet hum of it, the strange spontaneous community there, the waiting. The only time you used a laundromat was when you moved back to the land in the 1970s looking for simplicity. You lived on top of a hill in a wooden cabin deep in the Maine woods with no running water. In the winter you loaded up the laundry on a toboggan and dragged it down the slope in your cross-country skis.

You always did the laundry at home for Dad. It is the only domestic task that you really sunk in to, resisting the rest of the cooking and cleaning as a seventies feminist and staying at work late as a mental health counselor for troubled mothers. But when it came to laundry you took your time. You were always slow to

leave the house, lagging behind doing one more load before we could go. Hanging the pillowcases on the line as Dad and I sat in the car with the engine running, rolling our eyes.

You never strung up underwear outside. Indecent, you said. We had a special contraption in the bathroom to line up panties and bras privately.

In the Brooklyn laundromat I felt vulnerable with my holey socks spread out on the counter as I folded, my blood stained underwear.

For a hippie, you have an exaggerated fixation on decency. You wanted to tell me what was decent and what was indecent. Wasn't that the cloak of conservatism that your contemporaries shrugged off: naked muddy bodies, no clean laundry in sight?

Sometimes I air my dirty laundry, when a button-down is not quite soiled enough to warrant a washing, but too filled with my smells to be stuffed back in the drawer. I drape t-shirts over a chair and hang pants on doorknobs. I usually air my dirty laundry in private. My girlfriend says she doesn't understand my three-tiered system of cleanliness. She lets me do the laundry.

Before the lazy sloshing of machines, laundry was done by hand at a river with water alone, clothes wetted and beaten with a stick or rubbed across a washboard. I wonder if laundry was a more communal affair then, everyone in their 19<sup>th</sup>-century

petticoats lugging the linens, laughing at the riverside. I'm sure there are places in the world where laundry still goes this way, underpants on a rock getting slapped. Later there were wooden tubs filled with lye, urine, and ash to bleach the soils out. Early colonizers in America spread laundry out on communal bleaching grounds to dry: green grass covered in flat white aprons and bed sheets, like a giant picnic preparation site.

In my saddest (or most pathetic?) times, I've failed to put my clean laundry back into the drawers and slept with it in my bed, shirts and sweat pants wrapped up in the sheets. Cleanliness through osmosis.

In your mother's saddest times she couldn't keep her tongue in her mouth. It flopped out on her chin, lopsided and obese. That was when your mother started apologizing for everything. She apologized for taking your chair, for starting the war, for the anthrax. She called 911 after 9/11 and apologized. They sent men with rifles in SWAT gear to your sister's house as the dog lumbered in the windows and your mother rocked back and forth in her chair. She thought she was Jane Eyre and we were her children that she cared for, that she cleaned for. You've told me maybe your mother did laundry well. Maybe your interactions about laundry were healthy and normal, but you can't remember the specifics.

I've gone west, Mom. Here in the aridity of Tucson, I only go to the laundromat when it rains, when I've hung a load on the line and we wake up to the gray pelting on our adobe house. You bought me the small Japanese washer that we keep out back in our dusty yard. You tell me that my grandfather bought one for you as a house-warming present when I was born.

Usually I hang the laundry on the line and it's dry before dinner. When it rains, I load the sopping clothes into the back seat of our car. In Tucson, only the poorest are at the laundromat, especially in the winter, in the unsupervised warmth. There is a man curled in the corner. He wakes up all of a sudden and wanders around with his backpack. He's quiet. Three little boys ride the baskets on wheels back and forth screaming as their mother stoops and switches. The old woman motions to me to open the door and wants to ask me a lot of questions. Is there someone in the office? How long is yours taking to dry? Do you usually dry on the line? Can you help me with the door again? How was your Christmas? The skinny white couple must be on meth, pacing back and forth, rugged red faces with scabs, folding their sweaters and accepting heated cell phone calls.

Mom, I am grateful for the cold-water washer that you gifted me, for its convenience. I am grateful for my accessibility to clean socks and how I stare at the mountains when I hang our

panties on the line outside, indecently. Today, I am also relieved to have the 45-minute window in the laundromat as our wet clothes dry. Like an ocean of time. I sit in the bucket seat plastic chair with my hands in pockets and close my eyes. I make a list of desires, to-dos, and places to go as I doze amid the buzzy white noise of the dryers.

Mom, can clean clothes take the place of a clean mind? Is it sometimes harder to air our emotions than to string up the pillowcases?

# Hypothecation

Daniel Aristi

We fear the house  
We just bought more than  
We fear fire and its appetites, irrationally  
In the bank they'll treat you  
Like family, a cousin, not too close, close enough  
Then you go home breathing  
To your old abode & paramour  
"It is not you," you confess, "*I need more*"  
You know what they say, location, location  
Relocation, for the first time you gotta dislocate  
Your limbs to be able to crawl out one last time  
In your head, or from it, and downstairs  
The deli, one last bagel, Mr. Werkowitz—  
One last Mr. Werkowitz, who closes the dynasty  
Stateside at least, there are others back in Gdansk—  
And finally we enter our new house  
The door closes without muscles  
Closes all the same.

# Turning to Glass

Daisy Johnson

Glass houses put it out  
like even they fucked  
easier than we did.

Let's wait  
till my throat gullets  
round passing trees

and you can see  
your face in my thighs.

Let's wait  
till my sternum bridges  
motorway lanes

and you can watch your actions  
doubling in my navel.

# Take a Lap

## Matthew Bohn

I know it will be over before I can really register anything emotionally, so I let him drive on, my living half-brother, crying and rubbing his rough knuckles over his eyes like broken windshield wipers. Jerry heaves us like a bowling ball down I-99 towards home—Bishop. A rural town outside Pittsburgh where guys bale hay or wear hardhats, families leave house keys hanging from screen doors.

The highway lamps in my peripherals spark like my lighter-fluid-low Zippo. I blink, regain a balance in my stomach, and push in the cigarette lighter. The sun will be closer to rising when Jerry pulls the pickup into the lot where my two brothers and I learned to shoot hockey pucks and punch each other in the face.

The windows fog, because Jerry breathes through his mouth, intense and gross like a Pug. He fidgets with the dashboard buttons, pushes A/C instead of defrost. For too long, we've spent brutal winters on the pond, so we won't ever feel our toes

go numb. I blow smoke through my nose, focusing on my own breathing, short intakes of air so to save some.

“Christ, Jerry. You gotta relax,” I say.

Jerry’s never been good at taking constructive criticism.

“You’re going to get us pulled over or drive off the damn cliff!” I point with my head to the edge of the precipice.

Jerry shoots me a look, like I’m a drunken clown begging for the opportunity to make him a balloon elephant, and then before I notice him loosen his stone grip from the steering wheel, he swings for my ear with those sandpaper knuckles. He doesn’t take an eye off the tight bend we’re rolling into. Just keeps throwing, as I flail, sissy-like, trying to use the seatbelt as cover. He catches me across the temple, and I push back hard. He stops, both hands back at nine and three o’clock. I rub my head not daring to mention the gas light’s been on for at least an hour.

I beg for him to take a hit.

He asks me if I’m ever not high.

I don’t reply.

He cracks his window. On the stereo, some alt r&b plays, and I wonder where I’ve heard that term. Jerry falls loose in the shoulders like a swimmer on his block, and I can see our reflections in the windshield like it’s a small body of water.

Before the album reaches the third track, he takes the joint when I pass it to him.

We don't speak to one another, bug-eyed and buzzed, barreling towards a gas station. I rub the side of my head and think about jumping him as soon as our feet are planted on the concrete. Sock him with an open fist across the ear, so he can't hear. My eyes have a tough time adjusting to the fluorescent lights as Jerry jerks us into park before we're fully stopped. He ambles inside, buys Hostess cupcakes, and then fills up the tank.

I'm too tired to keep fighting. We lean elbows on the outsides of the truck's bed, looking at each other like pit bulls, but tired and unsure dogs, not entirely confident or present.

"I'm gonna kill us both," says Jerry, nonchalantly tossing the other cupcake to me. "Drive this piece of shit truck under an eighteen wheeler."

I drop the cake but pick it up from the bed, grunting a little, and say, "Fuck's wrong with you?"

"You tell me." He stuffs his mouth.

"Jackson's dead," I say.

"Fuck you, Kiran." The chocolate cake muffles Jerry's voice, and I go limp and kind of whiney.

"He didn't handle it all well, the game. He never did," I say.

“Blow me. It was all fucked.”

The gas pump clicks. I think about the rage. How it can be sucked up into spectacle, like it’s a drug, a wonderful poison too good to kick. See the fire-pissing, lunch-pail-carrying bison-men square off for dominance. It’s this officiated madness; it’s rolling in the dirt. People really fucking eat it all up. We have our fill, juicing from the mouth like rabid foragers. It’s never enough.

“Cool off, man,” I say. “Take a lap.”

No one other than our mother had ever met my father, and her ex-husband, the twins’ father, died of heart failure at the age of forty. I’d overheard a friend’s mother tell a woman once, “Oh, those poor, fatherless boys.” I say we could have run a small country if we’d wanted.

It is desolate with the hum of the highway and Jerry’s breathing. Someday, I think, we’ll remember all of this as a significant scene in our lives. Now, we just listen to the same album on repeat and watch snow fall at us like shattered Plexiglas.

Jackson had been a legitimate pro, called up to the majors on a regular basis, actually more often than Jerry. He even gained

glorious approval from the fans who loved a badass with cinderblock fists and an iron jaw. But it's hard to gauge when the dream's come full circle, when enough bones've been broken. Christ, we learned to skate before we could walk. What are another few knuckles to the side of the head? What's another handful of painkillers?

Jerry beats the sun by about three hours. Mom sits in her chair, where she's probably been all night, drinking a glass of red by a front window with Czar, her ten-year-old German shepherd. She moves towards the kitchen out of sight, while Czar barely makes it to the front door to meet us.

"Gentle with him, Kiran. You know he's an old boy."

Dropping his duffle bag onto the tile floor entrance, Jerry says, "We made it, Ma."

"Knew you would, baby."

We meet her in the kitchen. We hug her. Kiss her cheek. She smells like rust and her teeth are stained burgundy.

"You didn't need to wait up for us," I say.

She doesn't respond and makes her way back to the counter. My stepfather used to buy her pajamas for her birthday. The last pair he'd bought was white with orange polka dots and miniature blue whales all over. Now they were faded and comfortable,

thinning fabric that was nearly see-through. Blown out whales from too many washes that looked like globs of mashed potatoes.

I see that she's started to make three turkey sandwiches, don't mention it, and sit at the table where the Christmas placemats are already present.

"I have Doritos," she says.

The empty chair where Jackson would sit bends in my mind like hot glass. Jerry doesn't look away from his plate. He can't see that mom's eyes are hanging like pendulums, swinging separate of each other on two different clocks. Opposing mountain ranges. Differing erosions.

"You smell like marijuana, Kiran," she says.

I glance at Jerry who's more than half through with his food and then back to my plate. Mom says that Jackson wrote somewhere once that he wanted to be buried skates up when he dies. I laugh and Jerry sighs. We don't question where she read this, but we don't need to.

Mom pushes her chair backwards, grinding the hardwood. She huffs and starts putting wet dishes and dripping Tupperware into cupboards, wiping crumbs and tears into a paper towel stained with powdered cheese prints.

“There’re clean sheets and blankets in the closet upstairs. Put your shit in the dishwasher.”

I give Czar Doritos and watch him drop each chip to the floor, lick it and crunch it to pieces. If Jerry or I knew how to handle this whole situation, we would. But, shit, I usually get a tight throat and red eyes when I disappoint her anyway, and right now I’m fine, honestly, the calmest I’ve ever been in my whole life.

“Take up the garbage. Recycling too.” She drags herself up the stairs to bed. We make another round of sandwiches.

Seniority. People who’ve never been a part of a locker room don’t get how the world should work. It’s all very simple, I think, as I gather the trash around the house like a proud janitor. Lessons are learned and wisdom is passed. Everyone’s so god damn proud of the next guy, because there’s a common goal, there’s someone to pick salt from the wound and pick up the slack. At least that’s what I’ve always thought.

Mom’s slumped across her bed, one leg hanging off more than the other. I dump her wastebasket into my heavy-duty bag, switch off the light, and whisper goodnight. Jerry’s passed out in his jeans and half under the covers.

Outside, I can hear the crickets. Czar follows me up the driveway, claws dragging over the concrete like a novice tap dancer, slow and clumsy. The entire street block is lit up, and I have to remind myself it's the middle of the night. White and yellow and candy-cane light strings run like veins across house fronts, pumping a fever into the air.

I drag the barrels of waste to the curb and find the moon in the sky. It's my job to take out the trash when I'm here. It helps create a motion forward, teaches me how to handle life in a particular way that is manageable and beneficial. It's meaningful because everyone's been doing things this way since the beginning of time.

Before I make it back into the house, I remember to take up the recycling container.

The next morning, Mom says she's leaving to handle logistics at the funeral home for tomorrow. She prefers doing things like this alone, plus we need to find Jackson's old skates. I make coffee before Jerry and I walk around the house to the garage.

No one ever built steps from the basement to the upstairs. Ray, my stepdad, built our house mostly by himself, a little help from his friends who were always in and out of jail. He liked helping his buddies from high school, as if he'd felt like he owed

them something. Apparently one of them botched the framework, so Ray had adjusted, leveled everything, and after the divorce he'd said he would get to the steps one of these days.

Jerry and I stand in the cold air with steaming mugs and cumulus breaths drifting between our heads. I hawk my throat for mucous and spit towards the grass.

“Remember when you gave out the garage code to everyone in the neighborhood?”

“P-I-T-T.”

“Who’s boosting Civics around here, anyway?” says Jerry, defending me.

I say, “Jackson loved his Honda more than the dippy broads he fucked in its backseat.”

Jerry laughs for the first time since I can remember.

Even though I’d followed my brothers, getting out of Bishop, I spent much more time with the twins before they went pro. I’d been average on the ice but didn’t have the size or the speed to play like them. Mom turned the garage into storage when we all left.

Jerry and I wear sweatpants and hoodies and stare at the garage door that still has rubber burnouts streaking across the faded white paint from decades of target practice. Hundreds,

maybe thousands of pucks had whipped off the ends of splintered Sher-Wood's like flying saucers, tattooing the different goalies we imagined tending net, terrified.

The beaten wall retracts into the ceiling. We wait a minute before crossing over the cement lip, and then I follow Jerry into the cold, filled hollow.

"Giddy up," he says. Like this is a game.

We open boxes and ball up masking tape like wrapping paper. None of them are marked. Old bags of pucks, chipped and broken. Clothes and hats. Trophies from local pond hockey tourneys that Jackson organized. There are old Jofa helmets with the crusted, molded padding peeling out. We find senior pictures of girls, secret notes saved from innocence, even pinups cut out from magazines Jerry and Jackson had older kids buy at the local gas station when they were in grade school.

There are letters from colleges and junior teams all over North America. Most of them addressed to Jackson but like the homebody he was, Jackson wanted to stay as close to Bishop as possible.

"I'm a fucking Brawler," he'd say.

Mom wanted us to go to college like her. Ray dropped out, and I don't know about my dad, but I know we didn't have a choice. Three schools in the northeast pursued Jackson. He told

them he'd be there tomorrow only if they got Jerry a full ride too. Not that Jerry isn't good—it's just he'll never be the player Jackson was. Before the end of summer, the twins were at Mercyhurst, playing on the same line again.

"Look at that fuckin' bender," says Jerry, picking up pictures from all the teams they'd played on together.

"Always had the best flow," I say.

He points to Jackson in a picture, standing in the back row, his dark mullet curling up over his shoulder blades like some inventor of tough. A defined jaw line people admired with crooked scars jutting out as if his skin produced seismograms, each one a creation from trying to stitch his own wounds. Girls liked to run their fingers across the gnarly railroad lines on his face he'd told me.

"Are we really going to bury him with his skates on?" I ask, finishing my coffee and kicking a tape-ball around like a hacky sack.

Jerry doesn't have time to interject.

"I mean who the fuck says something like that? A fucking crazy person, right?"

Jerry picks at the tape of another box until he can rip it off whole. He says, "Well at least this time you'll be tightening his skates."

He's never been a good wiseass. The thought of lacing up skates on my dead brother's feet makes me sick. Sweat instantly forms on my spine, and I puke in a box full of ice hockey gear we'd grown out of but never donated because there was talk of bronzing it all. Before I carry it up the driveway to the curb, I hear Jerry mumble something. Fuck or Muck or Stuck. I don't stop for an explanation.

That night we go back to the boxes. Walking down the driveway, I see a bluish light glowing from deep in the woods. The moon hides behind a bruised sky. More snow is on the way Mom says.

I used to follow my brothers through the trees to the pond where we all learned how to skate, dragging a hockey bag loaded with everyone's gear. I hated them for making me haul things around, like a caddy.

"That shit made me strong," I say, like someone sleep-talking.

Jerry looks up from a box of Christmas ornaments and Halloween costumes.

"You and Jax made me into a tough kid," I say, facing the trees again.

“I know,” Jerry says. “We didn’t know how to be good brothers.”

Like a deep-sea fisherman and his catch, Jerry holds the skates by their laces in the air.

“Mom’ll be happy,” I say. “We should put guards on the blades.”

Jerry covers the rust-spotted silver, and we look at each other like lovers before a kiss. I can literally see both of us as if I’m out of my body watching what ought to be an awkward thing. But we’re calm. For a second, we’re really there with each other.

Jerry snaps out. “Dad’s a prick. She told him to stop eating Whoppers in the middle of the night.”

I don’t say anything, mainly because he’s right. Ray would know what to do now, how to assemble what’s left, level it all off and maybe build it up.

“Remember when I had to pull you off Jackson after he told you he’d fucked Beth Ann,” I say, kind of wishing I hadn’t.

Jerry laughs. “That bastard. He had them all.”

I can’t stop.

“He was protecting me. It was me. I took her in the back of your Bronco in the parking lot at the rink.”

Jerry's eye twitches a little. His prize fish falls from his hands like a pair of gloves, and the blade on one skate cracks, screeches on the cement like nails on a chalkboard.

We bounce off boxes and roll punches off each other's cheeks like the sharp air outside. We fall into the walls and even crumble some of the drywall. I'm tough, but it's been a while since I fought one of my brothers. I wiggle loose of Jerry's grapple, swoop up the skates from the floor, and take off through the snow into the woods. Jerry stops chasing me at the end of the driveway. Running in my house shoes, I hear him yell, "I'm not going anywhere, bitch!"

Bleeding from my nose, I run at the comfort level of a focused Olympic sprinter until a jagged bush grabs my ankles and throws me face first into a semi-frozen puddle.

The snow sucks up my blood like fresh cotton swabs, while the cuts on my legs burn from the cold air. Know these trails like the back of my hand, my ass. I want to feel some kind of enlightenment out here in the place I'd grown up. I am too far to turn around. I am too gone to get back. I get up. I run.

At the pond, I sit on the tree stump closest to the ice trying to slow the heaving in my chest. I peel away my soaked moccasins, dust the snow from my numb, wet feet, and slide

into Jackson's skates. A full boot size too big like everything else. I pull the laces tight around my scratched ankles.

The tire that I remember sticking half out of the ice is missing. For some reason I hope it's under there, the sludge and ice, somewhere. I shove a handful of snow up my nose. Smelling salts, I think, and an electric jolt.

Even with the busted blade, I chop in short strides around the gnarly ice surface. Eventually, slowly, I am gliding, not really using or putting pressure on the broken skate except for balance—reassurance that it's there no matter how fucked up it stands. And then I'm reminiscent that the last time I skated on the pond my brothers were with me, bickering like ravenous old men. Now, the sun falls behind the trees, and soon Czar will be barking, like he did when he was a healthy, young pup, letting me know it's time to come home.

# After the War

Kika Dorsey

You stole the newborn baby from the hospital.  
His face is wrinkled like an old man's  
and his hair wispy white and eyes dirty puddles.  
You hand him to me and I must care for this  
ugly baby. But I have no milk.

We are in a courtyard.  
It is raining.  
On blankets lie babies crying and I worry  
that they will drown in a flood.  
*Where are the bottles*, I ask you.  
There is no milk.  
You hand me a rusty saw.

The giant stucco building rises around us,  
dusty orange, the courtyard cobbled stone.  
There are no trees, nothing green.  
You say it survived the war, this medieval  
apartment building, and there are babies  
for each room. *But I have no room*, I say,  
and I pick up the baby and stroke his head  
of cotton. He cries with hunger.  
Above us an airplane roars.

*I must find a home*, I say.  
*And I must find his mother*.  
I leave the courtyard and cross the Roman bridge,

more ashen stone above the rising Danube.  
On the other side is a city of narrow cobbled streets  
winding, a labyrinth, a maze.  
I walk on wet stone in the rain,  
the baby nestled against my empty breasts.  
*If only I could change the rain to milk.*

The mother is a ghost.  
I am following the golden thread to her home  
in this gray, milkless labyrinth  
after the soldiers made love  
like thunder and rain,

rain and thunder.

# Barricade

Krista Genevieve Farris

When they placed four sawhorses in front of her house  
she thought she had front row seats to the parade.

She invited her friends who arrived  
to realize there was no parking.

She flung open her doors and waited as they circled  
the streets behind her home, searching for a spot.

The spanakopita got cold. The chilled salmon got warm.  
She wondered about the safety of each.

A few friends trickled in and commented about the hike they took  
from the alley where they parked a few blocks away—“in Siberia.”

She offered them vodka with a one armed hug.  
The police cleared the spectators off the street and curb.

They jumped to the sidewalk and volleyed for space with men  
hawking inflatable hammers, pop guns, blue pillows of cotton candy.

They edged close to her lawn. The marching began.  
Fathers put kids on their shoulders, blocking her view with jolly heads.

She was planted in her yard, heels sinking into slow draining soil—  
mimosa raised to toast, a plastered smile, maybe a knife.

Her friends kept repeating they couldn't see a thing.



Landlocked | Michael Mira

# run through the woods until you find the body

Delia Rainey

run through the woods until you find the body.  
bury the body under the dirt

like you are tucking someone goodnight  
under a blanket. under a big black hand.

before this, steal his coat—it is made out of horse hair.  
tell him a secret: *I have never seen a sunset before.*

run through the leaves like your head will fall off  
if you don't. the horse hair feels itchy  
like needles. like it could hurt you.

but at least you look good and  
you are an animal running.

there is a yellow light ahead—you don't know  
if it is the sun or just a very bright eye.

# Blue Lens Sunglasses Salesman

## Joseph Pipolo

He sold sunglasses with a blue-hued lens and said he had a degree in clinical psychology and theology. He claimed he wrote his PhD on the positive effects of the color blue on love. He sat in the park on Mondays—his day off from the hospital—but he said Mondays were his only real day *on*.

“These work, if you believe they work,” he said, holding them up carefully.

“But how do I believe in them? I *want* to.” The young woman seemed earnest.

“You simply see things blue and accept them as blue.”

“But what happens when you take them off?”

“Everything is still blue.” He slowly raised his palms to shape a cloud.

“How will this help me with love?”

“Blue *is* love.”

“Ohhhh, I see.”

This was how almost none of the conversations went.

Most people simply laughed or smiled and walked on. Most did not stop. He did not seem sad by that or angry. He did not seem to *need* to prove it. He simply smiled and said *Blue is love*.

One day a young woman was wheeling a travel case with a bumper sticker that read: *Johnny Cash is a Friend of Mine*.

She asked, “Why is blue love?”

“Because it is the color of berries and skies...the color of gas flames and fish and seas. It is the color of butterflies, birds and bonnets. And it is also the color of love.”

“But so is green the color of all these.” She said this not in correction, but almost worry.

“I did not say green is *not* love. I said blue is.”

“Blue is also the color of bruises.” She looked down at her case.

“A bruise is the evidence of blood and heart. A bruise is the heart’s response to hurt and hatred. A response of love. A bruise is the reminder to the world, the flesh, that the heart always wins. A bruise is a blooming flower stemming from the heart; it does grow from the violence—the bruise unfurls as an answer from the heart.”

“No.” She lifted her sleeve. “Look. Look at these.” She revealed four blue, purple, yellow ovals-fingerprints.

“Yes. A constellational response to the pulse of each digit the hand that held and hurt you.”

“Will these be there on my arm if I put on your lens?”

“They will always be there. The blue lens is a hue that asks the wearer to see evidence of love.”

“I am leaving.”

“I see that.” He said and nodded at her suitcase.

# What *Was* Her Name?

Nick R. Robinson

1

I had done my second girlfriend wrong. I was still doing her wrong as I sat in the bedroom waiting and wondering whether she would hear my page over the blare of airport announcements, the shouts of friends spotting friends and family greeting family. But why did it matter? I asked myself. Deep down, did I care? In my best imitation of the super hustler, Superfly, I muttered, “Hell no.” I told the worse-than-empty room, “She shouldn’t have come.”

It was the summer of 1975, and time crept in the heat-laden room where I sat cradling the phone and reckoning with my eighteen-year-old self. Penny, girlfriend number one, was out running a few final errands. Her aunt was still at work. I had moved into their cramped apartment just four weeks before. The ruckus rising up from D.C.’s North Capitol Street—the furious traffic, the fussing children—intruded on the silence of the coma-hot afternoon. The stark white-on-black numbers of the

night table clock radio slapped slowly forward, tiny droplets of time—“:06,” “:07,” “4:08 p.m.”

I’d learned from personal experience that life was hardscrabble. Pops always said, “Shit that don’t kill you will only make you stronger.” That second girlfriend of mine would be stronger after today; that’s what I told myself. Still, I needed to hear her voice again.

“I’ll continue ta hold,” I told the operator.

I was supposed to have been at the airport to greet her, all buffed and spit-shined: sprouting afro picked out and patted even, platform-ed shoes wiped clean, flowers in hand. Instead, I’d unpacked and repacked Penny’s and my scant belongings, recounted the few ducats we’d scraped together, and reviewed our own travel plans. First thing in the a.m., Penny and I would be splitting D.C. by way of Greyhound bus—destination, Toronto, Canada, the primary terminus of America’s draft dodgers and AWOLees.

In spite of my resolve to focus on my escape, I found myself thinking back to how she must have felt on the flight up: anticipation mixed with hand-wringing anxiety, jubilant but timorous as the landing gear slammed down. She had to be in a panic by now.

“Wheaa you aaaaat?” she wailed through the handset, voice shrill, drawl more insistent and vulnerable than I remembered. I laughed in sheer relief that she was still here.

Before this day, the farthest she had ventured from Millington (a backwater known for its land-locked naval base) was the twenty-odd miles to big-city Memphis and back; Memphis, with its banjo-plucking white folks and Jheri curl-wearing soul brothers and sisters; a pig-feet-and-chitterling-eating Memphis tucked deep into the southwestern corner of the not-so-great-state of Tennessee; a Memphis sandwiched between hillbilly Arkansas and redneck Mississippi (I had never visited either, but I’d read enough Faulkner and Hurston to know which was which.).

At the time I was possessed of a contempt, which most not-Southern black folk shared, for the geography that had enslaved for hundreds of years our antecedents. But if I disliked Memphis and the Deep South on principle, I couldn’t blame her for being the girl she was, for being a *‘bama*—named for that most backwards of backwardsy states, Alabama. Not one of us, I knew, had a say about where we’d been born. But *‘bama* was what citified niggers like me called countrified niggers like her. She’d be the first to say that she was country—she dressed country, talked country, she even smelled country (earth-reeking,

and smoky, like the Tennessee outside, not perfumeey like the girls at home)—living, as she did (always had) in tiny Millington, in the heart of Dixie. Sixteen-years-young, she had never boarded a plane before that day, had never been more than a *Hey ya'!!!* away from friends, relatives, her mama. Now here she was in the *real* big city, in our nation's capital; here to visit me, except I was nowhere to be found.

“Sorry. SORRY!” I whispered, then barked, into the mouthpiece. And when she continued her bawling: “Relax! I had a flat is all. Couldn’ get to a pay phone.”

“I been waitin’ here fo’ hours,” she choked. “I wanna go home.”

“Calm down gurl. Everything’s cool,” I said sturdily, with a bravado I didn’t feel, the same bravado she had fallen for during our first flirtation. (“A bold, skinny, high-yella boy wit’ good hair,” she’d confided, was the impression she’d taken away from that encounter.)

After a few final hiccup-y sobs, she sighed and sniffled, then, between sniffles, exclaimed, “I called Momma, collect. She say th’ operator couldn’ find no D.C. listin’ fo’ no Nick Robinson. She worried sick.”

Ignoring her unasked question, I replied, “Tire’s all changed, ride’s ready to roll. Soon as I hang up, I’m’a be on my way.”

“You prAW-mise?” she drawled. I could tell by the hint of honey seeping into her voice that she was starting to settle down.

“Of course I promise. Now, sit tight. I’ll be pullin’ up at National in fifteen minutes, tops.”

I remember some of her, some of the details of her, but I can’t fully reassemble her, can’t make her whole no matter my efforts to conjure her image. I don’t even remember her name, can’t even guess at it. I do remember that she was wide-nosed, plum-lipped, and burnt-toast-complexioned with a round basketball booty, like all those cornbread-eating Tennessee girls had, but tallish and slender in the frame (and as I might have said back then), just the way I liked them.

It may seem remarkable that I can recall these specifics but not her name. Maybe it was because I had grown accustomed to people drifting out of my life, most of whom were better forgotten; or maybe I wanted my old self to stay disappeared. Whatever the reason, she—What *was* her name?—the essence and humanity of this half-remembered girl now summoned forth into the present—had singularly jogged my memory. Because of the lingering residuum of our brief ghostly relationship, guilt, or

a new resolve to know myself, the past took shape and became strangely solid, instigating this journey back through time.

During that summer of '75, as the eighteen-year-old me tried to calm the sixteen-year-old her through the miles of telephone wire that connected us, I could picture her. I remember fragments of that picture, but with the soft focus attending memories of a memory.

In my imagination she gleamed, like a new nickel: ashy skin rubbed shiny with Vaseline, wiry-nappy hair parted into sections and pomaded and rough-combed and hot-ironed straight then rolled up tight by her mama or her aunt or any one of her many sisters the night before; in the morning, brushed and draped and sprayed and clamped with dozens of itty-bitty hairpins until her dull tight coils of steel-wool were magically transformed into a shiny beehive-of-a-helmet that hovered, stiff, around her face—an exact replica of Tammy Wynette's 'do when she sang "Stand by Your Man," except burnt-coffee-colored not blond.

I could picture her dressed to the nines in a hand-me-down version of the usual Memphis-y mauve or lime-green dress with matching mauve or lime-green purse and shoes. I imagined her clomping off that plane all dolled up and smelling of Murray's Pomade-fried hair and Johnson's baby powder, and breathing a sweet Juicy Fruit-y scent out of her flaring nostrils, ready to

embrace her eighteen-year-old city-slicker of a *boyfriend*, Nick, a dude she hadn't seen in six weeks, a cat she had known for barely a month before being told by him, "I ain't diggin' this scene," before being advised by her new beau that he was *splitting*, going Absent Without Leave from her and Hicksville Tennessee, AWOL from the U.S. Navy and Millington Naval Air Station.

## 2

Tennessee was where I had been shipped three months prior, following my graduation from the Navy's version of boot camp. The summer before, I had strutted into a downtown recruiting office. After waxing eloquent about signing up but before sitting down to their exam, I had challenged the Petty Officer recruiters—a pair of Laurel and Hardy lookalikes sporting bright chest ribbons of honor and glory—by staring unabashedly into their earnest-looking faces and asking, "What's th' highest-scoring position?" They'd shown me their teeth. I'd shown them mine.

If I seemed confident that day, my confidence was calculated. The draft had ended a year before, in '73, and it was clear from the sleepy office and the recruiters' earnest eagerness that folk weren't exactly lining up to join Uncle Sam's Navy, not with the

Vietnam War still officially underway. I had convinced myself that I was in the catbird seat with nary a worry about being shipped off to war; those recruiters needed me more than I needed them. But my assertiveness that day was not solely attributable to these circumstances. My blustery demeanor was an integral part of what I had come to think of as the new and improved Nick.

Over the last several years, I had transformed from a diffident, comic-book-stashing adolescent into a young man inspired by the wise-cracking slick-talking soul brothers who were the latest movie sensations: the master lover, Sweet Sweetback; the coke-dealing super pimp, Superfly—not the mild-mannered Virgil Tibbs. Because I wanted to be like them, I had affected a garrulous irascibility that didn't quite fit my jocular loose-jointed self. When I wasn't looking, my book-smart-ness had morphed into an acrobatic verbosity that was the backbone of *jone-ing*—*playing the dozens* was what Pops called it—the socio-cultural art of insulting and being insulted until one of the two *joners* quit, from anger or frustration or humiliation. (I liked to start with, “Yo’ mama so cheap, instead of a fire alarm, she hang Jiffy Pop on th’ wall.”) And, though I detested the acrid taste and smell of burning tobacco, I had taken to smoking

Kool Menthols, because smoking is what *cool* brothers did, and *cool* was what I thought I needed to be.

Like those film-star heroes of mine, I was good (enough)-looking—*cute* was what girls called me: tall enough at 5’9, and at 135 pounds, fence-post thin, with sharp features (for a soul brother) and light-*complexed*. I’d been called *Redbone* or *High-yella*—the quintessential disparagement for the 70s black man—since I was old enough to understand an insult: insults I began to reconsider when I heard Superfly called *Redbone* too.

I adopted my father’s crooked smile and his indomitable swagger. Through a persistent application of vinegar and raw eggs, I “trained” my parted and brushed-flat Boy Scout ‘do into a pick-able Jim “the Dragon” Kelly-style Afro. Like my film-heroes, my few vines—my single pair of bell-bottoms and two patterned, polyester shirts—were fly; my lifted-from-Lansburgh’s eyeglass frames (with the new, thinner prescription lenses) were the latest aviator-style. I had even learned to talk with a deep-voiced lazy rhythm that affected a disdain for the perilous twists and turns of ghetto life. I told myself that I was capable—if not comfortable—mingling with the meanest of society. And, if I didn’t have the bread, the quick cash that those movie-dudes had, because of my threads, my affected style and

cool rhythm, I had my share of chicks, broads—that’s what we called girls then.

This new-and-improved-me was starting to feel genuine. Sometimes—times when my new identity paid off as planned (with a new pal, a fresh chick, after bullshitting my way past an ass whipping by some tough)—I felt like one of my movie-heroes. Other times I questioned where all the blustering was taking me. Wars raged within me, mini Vietnams, battles between the still-library-book-reading-Nick and the new, fly version of myself. Despite all of these changes, however—or, maybe because of them—at almost eighteen I was desperate for opportunity, desperate for *something*.

One of the Petty Officers, the skinny Laurel-looking one glistening in his summer-whites, repeated my question, “The highest scoring position? Well, that’s got to be Nuclear Sub Tech, right?” he asked, glancing over at Hardy. And, just like that, Nuclear Submarine Technician was what I wanted to be. Despite a youth plagued by a fear of tight spaces, I longed to *technician* aboard a U.S. Navy Nuclear Submarine as it dived, hot and close, miles beneath the ocean’s surface, because only the tip-top-est Navy enlisted men were qualified to do this job. And

accomplishing something, anything at all, was what I wanted and needed to do.

When I returned to the sleepy recruiting office several weeks later, I was greeted by the hearty congratulations of the two Petty Officers: the skinny one, Laurel, squeezing and pumping my hand as the plump one, Hardy, bellowed, “Mr. Robinson, consider yourself a qualified Aviation Electrician!”

Confused, I repeated, “Aviation Electrician?”

With cheerful commiseration, Hardy divulged, “You scored just *below* qualifying for NuclearSubTech. Aviation Electrician is the second-highest scoring position.” Or maybe he told me it was the third- or the fourth-highest. Ultimately, it didn’t matter. Having never stripped a wire, never installed a socket, I enlisted in the U.S. Navy in August, a few days after my eighteenth birthday. Six days before Christmas, I was marching in loose formation with a ragtag of newly enlisted *squids* past vast rectangular signage that read, “Jacksonville Naval Air Station, Aviation Fundamental School.” Three and a half months after that, in mid-April of ‘75, the hot concrete of Millington’s Naval Air Station was burning beneath my feet.

Millington was where I met her, in a Millington park or some Millington shop or as she was lollygagging through Millington's excuse-of-a-downtown with a gaggle of girlfriends. Maybe.

I'm guessing about where, but I *know* when. I met her a few weeks after my arrival at the air station. It was a Saturday. I remember because *I'd* been out lollygagging myself the evening before, Friday night, the night of my first payday. This was the night that my new Puerto Rican roommate, Oscar, decided to buy me some *down-home Millington pussy*; that was exactly the way he put it. Being a big-city boy, I knew nothing was free. I wondered whether his alleged generosity was some sort of initiation: a test of manhood, maybe.

I confess, the idea of having sex with a prostitute terrified me (some of this fear I attribute to my concern with not living up to the standards my father had set for me), although I considered myself at least as experienced as most my age. I had had something resembling sex at the most precious age of seven—under-the-kitchen-table trysts during sleepy Sunday afternoons with the eleven and nine year-old sisters, Darlene and Sandra. I had felt up a couple of girls in ninth grade. And I'd had rip-off-her-clothes-but-don't-look-in-her-eyes coitus with as many girls over the ensuing years, as a high school dropout and a runaway

from Junior Village, D.C.'s government-run orphanage. Then there was my first love, Penny.

Thinking back, I was also intimidated by the imagined prolificacy of a professional: fearful of being stacked up and measured against the whole Navy and Marine Corps who had laid siege to her. I was, after all, barely eighteen and still trying on for size the blustery-self-confident-Nick. But, what kind of *man*—so my mind went then—turns down free pussy? That was how and why I'd ended up in front of the thin print curtain in the hideous one-room hovel, the hut, the almost lean-to that was one of a warren of hovels/huts/almost-lean-tos that littered the unpaved dirt roads of Millington's old Negro ghetto.

Millington: The sun's unrelenting gaze and the *thock-thock-thock* of helicopter rotor blades chopping the shimmering heat; screaming fighter jets zooming up from the earth's surface; the thud and squeal of whining aircraft landing amidst tarry effluviums of Goodyear-melt marking long concrete strips; jets taxiing in clumps, waddling like geese toward squat giant aerodrome hangars where engines belched and ticked and buzzed like dentist's drills, and exhaust spewed and pilots climbed out of and into their craft: the infinite Quonset hut and hangars from which mini-scooters and motorcycles, buses and

bicycles rushed to and fro, racing around and past thousands of pedestrians purposefully striding, sailors marching in waving flag-like formations, where men and women scurried frenetically from one long aluminum edifice to another, ants in a grand concrete and aluminum symposium of activity.

Millington Naval Air Station was a behemoth, a bustling giant of a place, even for a big-city boy like me. At thirty-five hundred acres, it was the world's largest inland naval base, a cosmos-of-a-complex designed and constructed to train air and ground crews in the operation and maintenance of the Navy's sea- and land-based aircraft; Millington Naval Air Station was where over twenty-three thousand naval students—mostly male, mostly young recruits like me—rotated annually.

I waited in the prostitute's hovel, my sun-darkened face blank, spine pressed flat against the raw, inside-front wooden wall, two or three Lilliputian arms-lengths away from the suspended curtain and the slapping-spanking sounds beyond it, the sounds of Oscar desperately attempting to awaken the flesh of the tired-looking woman who had greeted us that evening: the battle sounds of fornication, of fucking, of flesh and bone smacking flesh and bone, the sounds of a young man attempting to suck pleasure from the crevices of a woman doing everything in her power to bring him to climax with all the dirty heatless

words and sounds and movements she could muster. I knew she had won when I heard his long moan followed by her cry of satisfaction, more like concluding a battle than orgasmic bliss. When he exited the back of the hovel with a grand flourish of the curtain, it was my turn.

“Come on, baby, off with them clothes,” the tired-looking, freshly lipsticked woman murmured, naked, from the stained pallet laid across the floor. “Don’ be shy.”

The air had an amoniac odor. The woman—I don’t remember her clearly, except for her painted lips and the sight of her cracked fingers curling—gestured, and I recall thinking, *I can’t do this*. As I began to disrobe, I imagined Oscar on the other side of the curtain. I thought of him waiting and listening as the woman pulled me onto the pallet. As her cracked fingers kneaded me, I could hear the cries of intoxicated men moiling about the warren’s hovels. I told myself, *Concentrate!* I thought back to how lonely I had been over my first weeks in Millington: the stretched nights and persistent thoughts of Penny: her gap-toothed smile and ingénue eyes, bronzed breasts and the feel of my fingers slipping into deep salty femaleness. Just when I seemed to feel a twinge of responsiveness, a trickle of lifeblood in my unresponsive self, that hard-working, hard-looking woman—she had to have been thirty-five, at least—muttered

something impatient-sounding, and I lost that skirmish with myself.

To her credit, the woman was persistent. She pulled a diminutive square from beneath the pallet, tore open the cellophane packaging with her teeth, centered the opaque circle between her lips, then skillfully, using her tongue and lips, slowly unrolled the translucent membrane down and over my limpness until she swallowed me whole. I could feel the warmth of her mouth through the membrane, the pressure of her lips, her thumb and forefinger holding the rolled end of the condom firmly. For minutes, it seemed, she crouched over me, mouth working, head bobbing in a persistent pecking motion.

Nothing.

“Wait,” I pleaded. As I wiped the wetness running down my face, the woman looked up at me, lipstick smeared, her no-longer-neutral face peering into mine. It was during such instances, when my dignity had been battered beyond what seemed endurable—after one of Pops’ cane beatings or during his abuses of my sister and mother—that my younger self had typically erased himself, blacking out, one minute there, the next not, a fragment invisible.

But the new-and-improved-Nick wouldn’t permit such indulgent self-erasure.

I reached under the inside padding of my right shoe then pushed my emergency money—a folded twenty-dollar bill—in the woman’s direction. She accepted my offering without protest or thanks or any suggestion that she’d already been paid. As I tugged at my skivvies, the low snickering recoiling from the floorboards and the rough wooden walls and through the sheer curtain waving in the thick invisible air, told me that Oscar had overheard my capitulation.

He and I left the place without a word, joining the teeming mass of men disgorging from the huts into the searchlight of the southern moon, hovel and tenement voiding a ragtag of black and white, yellow and red into lane and alley, men hauling their spent selves back to the bustling aluminum and concrete hive of Millington Naval Air Station.

Later that evening, as Oscar snorted and stretched like a snake, I lay in my bunk tracing the lines in the splintered ceiling. I lay in a bunk similar to the bunks in which I’d spent my youth—bunks at Junior Village and Auberle Home for Boys—bunks within which I’d fought off the nighttime forays of other sad and hungry boys and, afterwards, lain awake tracing similar lines in similar ceilings as I prayed that destiny would carry me to a more benevolent place. I lay in the bunk watching the familiar

ceiling descend and collapse, trapping and smothering me in memories of those hungry nights, and of that night: memories of my flesh shrinking, betraying the slick-talking tough-acting me.

I lay awake thinking there was no excuse for my ineptitude. Hadn't I learned from the best, from Pops, who had insisted when I was eleven that I "be a man." But I hadn't a clue what being a man meant. I can see Pops lecturing as he lounges, gladiator handsome, on our folded-up sofa bed. "Length is okay," he says, "but what females really want is a fat dick. Women *like* fucking. But men, especially Negro men, *need* to fuck all the time."

In spite of my hatred for him, over the years I remembered these words because Pops was the quintessential man. Pops knew women. He had lain with and benefited from the good graces of more women than any man I knew, including those macking movie-star heroes of mine. And I'd learned: some men were naturally more gifted at fucking than others. He was one of the lucky ones—he let me know that his God-given proficiency was what made him special.

My experience with the prostitute had taught me that I was not blessed. I could not "fuck all the time." And, if I couldn't when I needed to, what kind of son was I? What kind of man? What kind of black man? Not only *wasn't* I a hustler, I was

nowhere near as capable as my low-down dad. And that bit with me weeping in front of the prostitute, what had *that* been all about? It was—I had thought at the time—like I’d turned into a girl, a sissy.

I awakened the next morning to the cries of roosters heralding the arc of sunrise. I tried to lose myself in Millington Township that day, Saturday. That’s when I met her. She was an Everygirl, slender and sweet, and ready for love, for life. The rest is a blur: my declarations of love (which she’d insisted on), my effortless devouring of her virginity within days of our meeting, the sweet eyeball-to-eyeball sex followed by the unavoidable introductions to her mama and aunts and to her many sisters, and, with the words, *Consida’ ya’ self one’a th’ fam’ly*, my adoption into her multitudinous clan, with an easy celerity, at the warp speed of just-formed Deep South relationships, with no studied familial consideration, no getting-to-know-you transition. Looking back, there was a sense of belonging that I experienced with her family, an unlikely bonding I never could have predicted. And with her whole attention and her family’s unbridled affection coming at me, a childish desperation for love bubbled up that I thought I had left behind.

I would come to understand that I was her mama's *redboned* northern Messiah, a boy-man who would transport her southern jewel-in-the-making—the dirt-poor youngest daughter of a dirt-poor single, Southern mother—to the Promised Land. But although that Tennessee girl rescued me from my opprobrium, I did not rescue her. Instead, in the space of the six weeks of our courtship, my U.S. Navy life disintegrated, and she, unpredictably, would visit my birth city—Washington, D.C.

4

Back when I stepped onto the blistering concrete of Millington Naval Air Station in mid-April of 1975, my new Petty Officer had asked, “You wanna try drill-teaming? It’s part-time, with extra pay.”

*Extra pay*, I thought. What I asked was, “Can I be a’ Aviation ‘Lectrician if I’m drilling-teaming?”

My new PO, a thirty-ish looking Caucasian with droopy eyes, a sloping forehead and mostly-gone mousey brown hair, shrugged his skinny shoulders and mumbled something that sounded like an affirmative.

I wasn’t sure why he picked me. I didn’t want to press my luck by asking. The more I chewed on his offer, the more I bought into the idea of marching—Hut Hut Hut—all martial, in

an all-white uniform—helmet, shirt, belt, pants and gloves—part of a constellation of twirling and tossing wooden rifles, of high-stepping and chop-striding to a blaring Navy band that roared like the sea, with the crowd singing “God Bless America,” and thinking *How good we are, how right we are*. I would be one of the flesh and blood cogs in the extra-special Millington Naval Air Station drill team wheel: extra-special by way of supplemented pay and privileged lodging—two men to a room instead of one hundred to a barracks. “Arright, I’ll drill,” I’d replied. This was how and why I joined the drill team. Because nothing suited the wanna-cruise-through-life side of eighteen-year-old Nick better than extra cash and being treated extra-special while looking good.

I did not do either job well. Over those first six weeks at Millington, I attended classes during the day. Early mornings and late nights, I drilled assuredly, faithfully, drudged bitterly through what I came to see as the loss of my individuality and of my personal freedom. Evenings, exhausted, I thumbed lifts into town, to my country girl’s mama’s house. In the end, it was the Tennessee heat, the sweat, the sticky smell of myself in those heavy Navy whites, the long work hours, the regimentation, it was the restriction, the boredom, the isolation, the futility of it all that proved to be my downfall. Or, maybe, it was the knock-

down, drag-outs I was having with Oscar about my failure that night of the full moon, which triggered some unconscious feeling within me that the U.S. Navy was just another version of the same institutional bullshit I had lived with since I was child. Towards the end of those six weeks at Millington, it was the prospect of years of the same unrelenting structure that beat me down and wore me out.

One morning I slept in rather than rising to the bugle call of reveille. Later that day, disgusted with fecal stink and the glare of fluorescent lights, I walked away from my latrine duty punishment. When reprimanded by my narrow-shouldered P.O. for the second time that day, I told him—in the spirit of my movie hero, Superfly, and righteous black men the world over—to “Get off my case.” I’m sure it was the muttered under the breath “butthole” at the end of the sentence that provoked his response of “You’re fucked sailor.”

It happened fast. Before I could say, “That wa’n’t really me talkin’,” I found myself booted off that extra-special, God-bless-America drill-team duty, *and* busted, in pay *and* grade, *and* reassigned from my extra-special two-men-per-room quarters to one of the not-so-special enlisted men’s one-hundred-man barracks.

Near the end of that same incautious day, I paused just inside the entrance to the barracks. Even as I recoiled from the smell of myriad men living and breathing and sleeping in close quarters—the soupy-tangy odor of sailors grabassing and lounging in sweaty socks and skivvies—I took in the sight of one hundred narrow racks lined up like matches in a matchbook within which men wisecracked and vigorously shined their boots or read newspapers and comic books or listened to radios belting out a cacophony of gospel talk and country-rock-soul music. And it was as if I was a boy again.

It had been more than three and a half years since Junior Village, and I had almost managed to lose the images and odors of my adolescence. That grabassing barracks brought every bit of it back.

As I stood in the doorway beholding this spectacle, my seaman's bag tugging insistently at my shoulder, the harsh smells of the institutions of my boyhood greeted me like wild animals, the sad familiar smells of D.C. Receiving Home and of the orphanages of Junior Village and Auberle Home for Boys, zoo-like places from which the animals could never escape, feral odors trapped within the D.C. Youth Center and the twelve-foot-high brick walls and castle-like structures of Saint Elizabeths Hospital, the asylum within which Mama was still

incarcerated. Within this barracks my ghosts lived and thrived, palpable in the soupy air. And, at that moment, I understood the error I'd made enlisting in Uncle Sam's Navy.

Or maybe this remembrance of odors and animals is nothing more than an invention, an excuse, my rationale for being a quitter. What is certain is that as I stood in that doorway, I decided to do what I had been doing since I was eleven—I decided to run, to abscond; I went AWOL. With everything I owned in the duffle on my back, I simply turned and walked away. Within minutes I thumbed a lift and was on my way to my country girl's mama's house. Two weeks later, I was back in D.C.

## 5

Have you seen an airplane motor up close? I remember peering for the first time into the guts of a Millington Air Station jet engine. I recall the maze of metal bonded to gleaming metal, angular alloy squares and cogs bolted and clamped over and around rods and rectangles of blazing alloy connecting to a coruscating windmill—the largest rotary fan I had ever seen—such that they formed a single monstrous entity. I remember the tornado of wind the engine created: the seething roar was deafening, even through the noise-damping earphones I wore. I

remember feeling overwhelmed by the metal behemoth. I recall how mystifying it seemed.

Studying the components of story and memory I am bolting together today, I am left with a similar feeling of awe and mystery. I am left wondering, who was I then? I am struck by the power of recollection, even as I am not sure how one memory connects to another. I am not sure of the meaning behind segments, or even if meaning can be derived from these fragments of remembrance. Are the parts of the memories I am telling the right parts to tell?

Then there are the memories I chose to forget. This is what we do—devise systems of elaborate forgetfulness. But the experience is no less harmful because we decide to forget it. And, when those memories come lumbering back—in a dream, or with fingers poised above keyboards—we are deeply surprised or guilt-stricken to have been who we were. I am amazed at how I chose self-interest over principle every time yet continued to believe in my own innocence. By the age of eighteen, I had not been innocent for some time. By eighteen, my childhood sufferings were the excuse for a betrayal I tried to forget with a young woman whose name I decided not to remember.

I seldom told her that I loved her. I told myself that the girl I left in Tennessee being here in D.C. and in this predicament was her own fault. When I'd left Millington, I had no intentions of contacting her. Ever. She was an incidental part of my recently troubled past.

But weeks after leaving, I called. For some unfathomable reason, I needed to hear her, to maintain some tenuous connection to her. On one of those occasions, as I sat listening to the singsong cadence of her voice, it was she who expressed what we both felt.

"I wanna see you."

"I ain't stepping foot in Tennessee."

"I'll come ta D.C."

"What about yo' mama?"

"Momma want me ta be happy."

When I agreed to buy her an airline ticket to D.C., I was just signifying, misdirecting her. I had no intention of seeing her again. Even so, the *thought* of seeing her quieted the fire in my chest.

And so I described the tree-lined, boulevard-like avenues; the gleaming dome of the U.S. Capitol building; the spotlighted obelisk that was the Washington Monument—the grand

symbols of our proud democracy. I told her there was money in the air of Washington, D.C. I never told her about the putrid Anacostia River dividing the Caucasian spit-shined D.C. from Chocolate City and the hordes of poor, uneducated, Hershey-colored men and women living a bullet away, across the proverbial tracks. I told her of a TV-land version of the District of Columbia where freedom and triumph were unrestricted because this was a D.C. I desperately, myself, wanted to see. I told her about the Technicolor, sugar-coated nation's capital because I thought that she, like me, might never get to see it. And I told her about D.C. because I knew I would never purchase the promised ticket—I didn't have the loot. Even if I'd had it, I was living with Penny and her aunt. Knowing this, I made the promise. My mendacity lay easy within me because I knew that she had no way of locating me, of contacting me, she had no address or telephone number for me. She'd never asked. She was that kind of girl. Trusting.

We spoke infrequently but passionately, quick calls when I was alone in the aunt's apartment. During those talks, I tried not to think ahead. But visiting D.C. was all she talked about. As the date for Penny's and my departure to Toronto and her scheduled arrival neared, I could think of nothing else. *Don't call her again. Leave her wondering* is what I told myself. But I called her the night

before her not-to-be visit with a confession swelling in my throat. That's when she told me, "Yo' letter didn' get here yet, so Momma borrowed th' money n' bought th' tickets."

I could not speak. Rather, sorrow welled up inside me; I teared up silently, childlike, even as I exhorted myself to tell her the truth: *I haven't sent the money; I never intended to.* But in some way, unconsciously perhaps, I wanted to be her Messiah. I could never admit that I was not. Not on the telephone that night. Not even when she was waiting for me at National Airport.

As I hugged the princess handset to my face, I realized that I *had* come to care for her. Did I love her? After seeing what had passed for love between Pops and Mama, between Mama and *her* father and mother, love was something I was determined to avoid. Besides, what would I do if she and I *were* in love, *were* together? We would be like two animals rutting in the gutter, in the mud of Millington Park—our first boudoir. The flies and the dirt were all we knew. I wanted more out of life than a future with her could provide.

That Tennessee girl and her family would drag me back down into the despair I was desperate to escape, is what I thought, like Chesapeake Bay crabs in a boiling caldron pulling back their brethren dangling on the lip of freedom. I told myself that she

was young. If left on her own, she'd forget me, meet someone who wasn't monkeying around, fall in love, marry, even.

And so, months after Tricky Dick Nixon resigned his presidency, weeks after the Vietcong invaded Saigon, within months of when Cassius Clay—draft evader and two-time world boxing champion—won the world championship for a record-setting third time, I set my mouth in a line. I looked anywhere in that coma-hot room except at the bedroom window where I might have caught a glimpse of my reflection in the glass. I reminded myself that sometimes you had to stop your thoughts, halt your feelings if you wished to remain whole, because love could take everything from you. Look at what Pops' *love* had done to Mama, to Cookie and me.

"Hurry up!" were the last words she spoke to me.

I remember the *slap, slap* of the clock radio's page-like lamels making a racket in the less-than-empty room. For a cut of time that was not long and was not short, I hugged the receiver to my ear. When I finally opened my mouth, it was in a whisper.

"I'm coming!" were my last words to her.



Theme in Blue | Clinton Van Inman

# Virgin, or The Woman You Think Is Me Leah Horlick

If you can't have it, at least I should give you  
the story of how it was taken.

But that relic is long gone, and when I give you  
*no* instead, you hoof & paw, blow

inlets of steam until I know you. You're that noble  
creature, single-minded, sharp-browed,

who can only be captured by a woman *untouched*.  
The woman you think is me.

We can pretend if you really want to. Both of us  
are a myth. You lay your head

in my lap like you're a unicorn, & I'm something  
I haven't been in a very long time.

# Recognition

Kevin Brown

I would not recognize the first you I met  
if I saw her today, nor she me. If time  
travel were possible, we would pass by each  
other on a sidewalk, not speaking. She might  
wonder about that middle-aged man's

life, but probably not; I might notice her  
and think, *Women are so young, these days.*  
Our brains read and write memories over  
one another, covering the small changes

that come with time. I cannot imagine my  
father at fifty, without pictures, now he has  
passed seventy; he has always looked like this.

I would not know your life now—doing  
something, living somewhere with someone,  
alive the last time I asked the internet. Perhaps  
we have even vacationed in the same city

at the same time or you visited where I  
now live or I you. Perhaps you even took  
a picture of your family—a little girl  
with eyes like yours, eyes that will look  
at someone someday the way you once looked

at me—and in the background is a middle-aged man who just before was looking backwards, toward the camera, but who is just now turning the other way as the shutter snaps.

# Waco

Alicia Mountain

The name of the corner bar that was my favorite place  
the summer I turned 19 has left me for good.  
With my eyes closed I see the brick front at dusk  
waiting at the corner of Brazos and 3<sup>rd</sup>  
for the light to change. Someone's hand is in mine  
and I've forgotten her name too. I remember  
I smoked her cigarettes for a month and  
started wearing my brother's Wrangler jacket,  
left it on inside to hide the way pit-stained July  
hung on me. The two desert years that came next  
were the champagne of beers, if champagne is  
something precious that I wasted, eagerly bubbling over,  
a quick emptiness that I'm too badly bred for.  
I totaled my car and paid to have it fixed  
and wrecked it again. The same day we got matching  
coyote tattoos, I punched Mackenzie in the face.  
He was trying to tell me to dump the girl who kept stealing  
money out of my wallet when she slept over,  
that I had too much guts in me to be a fucking doormat.  
I held on to my cowardice until it calloused my hands.  
With my eyes closed I can smell the Hilfiger cologne  
on Bud, the quarterback bartender who feeds  
all the tips I leave him into the juke box.  
He sung *I shot a man in Reno*, shook his head  
like he was watching a lying priest die in the dirt  
like he was the only one who knew it was a lie.  
Bud's arm around my skinny shoulders

was the heaviest part of my saying, “I’m gonna get out of town for a while and try to sober up, go to school.” Sage and juniper and cinnamon on his neck when he looked into my face and said, “I like you enough that hope I never see you again. Run from this place as if somebody’s after you. Don’t send me a postcard.” A week later, when I’d lost my nerve and hadn’t bought the bus ticket, I walked to the lost name bar, drunk already. His face wet, heartbroke, he came around the bar and pulled me rough by the collar outside. Holding my throat against the brick front he shoved a fistful of bills into my pocket saying, “High Life from the can tastes like blood. Get the fuck out before you drown in it.”



Mike on Mike at the Ultramar | Hannah Epstein

# Different Gods

Tyler L. Erlendson

His God is dripping  
from an IV bag into  
his intricately tattooed arm  
He no longer believes in a Savior  
opening up space for mermaids  
and the latest sighting of Bigfoot  
reported on the Discovery channel.

My God is quite busy  
hearing my twelve prayers an hour  
the rest of the family drinking cheap beer  
are consumed by their own diseases  
ones doctors have not  
given any names.

My brother is listening to music  
his headphones thumping a beat  
into the large ears we  
all made fun of as kids  
the subtle buzz of his liquid death machine  
reminds me that I  
am long overdue for a haircut.

# Quality Inn

## Tamer Mostafa

There's no elevator here and he already  
hates the place, hitting the concrete steps  
with his wooden cane. "At least you have  
a smoking room," I tell him, carrying his  
luggage: one duffle, the other roller. Both  
feel more than the weight limit airlines allow.

I throw them on the padded bed, sit on the floor  
by the brown molding against the white wall,  
watch him pull the gifts out, starting with  
newspapers and their Arabic, detailing  
the fallout from the revolution: dead bodies,  
new leaders, family members on opposite sides.

There are stacks of clothes, undershirts from a country  
known for its cotton after the wonders and turmoil,  
a few handcrafted dresses served as peace offerings  
covered in glued gold flakes and bells.  
"Mother's not a belly dancer," I say.

He has me try the plain sugar cookies that don't  
taste like sugar, and then empties the carton of  
L&M cigarettes plastered in pictures of what looks  
like meth mouth and sexual incompetence  
to deter people from smoking their product.

There is some resemblance to the mouth:  
the molars are gone and the front ones look like  
a collapsing fence missing every other plank or two.  
Sometimes three. I wonder how he eats, probably  
a lot of liquids that can filter through the gaps.

I hand over the cash in my pocket, enough for a hot  
burger if he can manage chewing for a few minutes.  
The room is on my credit card that isn't enough to keep him  
for longer than a couple nights.

# The Doll and the Samsonite

Margaret Ries

I put my suitcase in front of the door to my apartment yesterday. Out on the landing, on the cold gray tile. It's an old suitcase. A Samsonite, one of those hard-back dinosaurs nobody wants anymore. Black fake leather with a silver spine ending in two levers. When you press down on a couple of buttons, the metal levers fly to attention and the suitcase is open. Push them down, and it's closed. There are also two squares that fit into the metal spine with initials on them. L on one side, M on the other.

These initials mean nothing to me.

I haven't had time to go to Goodwill so the suitcase has been out there for a couple of weeks. It's gotten to be like the welcome mat in front of my door. I don't even register it. A stolid black shape filling my vision like an oil slick. Today, though, something's different. Has it moved? On a whim, I fit my hand under the handle and pick it up. It's heavier than I remember.

I pull the suitcase on its side and pop the locks. Inside, a doll's head is lying on the pink satin lining. It stares at me with

its blue glass eyes rimmed with lashes as thick as mink. I give the suitcase a shove and both of the doll's eyelids go down and up twice. It's almost like it's winking at me, but there is also a touch of a grimace in it. Don't be stupid, I think. Dolls don't grimace.

I look over my shoulder. I have the feeling the person who's put it there is close by, just out of sight. You know the feeling—when you've just missed somebody it's like their molecules are still there, vibrating in the air. But there's no one. Just me, the Samsonite and the doll's head.

I think it's strange, but I just sort of shrug my shoulders at it. Someone was probably throwing the thing out—the head having long been separated from the body—and didn't feel like going all the way outside to the dumpster. The family upstairs has a baby girl. I hear her screaming and throwing a tantrum sometimes. I unlock the door, go inside and forget about it.

A couple more weeks pass. There's a big project at the office—I moved here nine months ago to work on it—and so I am out the door early and back late, and I still haven't made it to Goodwill. It's on the other side of town and only open till five. One evening, I'm mulling over a tough problem with my part of the computer program we're writing and not looking where I'm going. I trip on the top step and go sprawling, my arms out, trying to break my fall, my satchel slamming into the suitcase. It

clicks open like a safe. The doll's head is still there, but now it has been anchored to a pink plastic body, its belly swollen and hard like a pregnant woman's.

This is getting weird, I think. Why not just throw the whole thing away once and for all? Or, if you're too lazy to go outside to the dumpster, why bother reattaching the head to the body? Why not just toss the one in after the other?

I pick myself up off the ground and sling my bag over my shoulder. As I close the suitcase, I hear the clicking of the doll's eyes. This time I would have sworn it winked at me. I slam the suitcase shut.

I start to avoid my apartment after that. The project at work's heating up and I find myself staying away longer and longer. I also start slipping out the back way. It's easy enough to go down the fire escape, negotiate the three-foot drop at the bottom. Just like jumping in off the side of the pool. Wait. Wait. Wait. Jump! In and off. Except that after several days without mishap, I skid on a pile of rubble and rip a hole in my jeans.

"Damn it," I say, wiping off my bruised ass.

I walk around to the front of the building and push open the door. I'm gonna be late for work. As I crest the stairs, I spy the Samsonite. "You're history, pal," I say, giving it a sound kick.

The two halves open like a book. The doll has grown arms since I last checked. They stretch out towards me, those ugly pink stubs of hands open and grasping.

I leave the suitcase where it is, change my pants and get myself to work as quickly as I can. I try not to think about it, but it is always there, clawing at the edges of my consciousness. And then, as I finally pack up my things to head home, as I climb on the bus, slump against the window, as my feet touch the pavement and walk down the street, as I push against the door and trudge up the stairs, it grows, gathering weight, speed, until finally, there it is: a big black whole that everyone seems to think they can put anything in to. Seems like someone's sick idea of a practical joke. But whose?

In my mind, I run through the people in the building. 3a. That has to be it. I grab the legless doll and the Samsonite and take the stairs two at a time. It's late, but I pound on the door, hard and then harder.

"Just a minute."

Mrs. Green opens the door, pulling her robe tight, blinking at me, the light in the hall. I've clearly just woken her up. And the baby, too. I can hear it howling in the background.

I hold up the doll, my fingers tight around its plastic belly.

“Have you ever seen this before?” I shake it so its eyes will wink at her.

Mrs. Green looks at the doll, then back at me. Her blue eyes flare slightly with fear. “No. I can’t say that I have. Joey doesn’t play with dolls.”

I feel my shoulders sag. I mumble something about being sorry for having disturbed her, and press on to 3b. It’s the same story throughout the building. Nobody knows what I’m talking about and everybody gives me the same look as Mrs. Green—that mix of fear and sympathy reserved for crazy people.

I shut the doll up in her suitcase and go to bed, feeling her tiny pink hands squeeze the blood from my heart.

When I go to work the next day, I walk down the front stairs, not out the back, like a criminal. When I come home, I kneel before the suitcase. I press the two buttons. First the “L” and then the “M.” My heart doesn’t waver, quiver, or jump. It is as I expected. The baby sports legs now, two chubby, dimpled legs with pigeon-toed feet.

I tuck her under my arm and unlock the door. I bring the Samsonite back in, too. I fill it with winter clothes, my college tennis racket, that picture of Lucy and me, before things went pear-shaped and she sent me packing, and slide it under the bed. I guess there are some things you can’t throw away.

I put the baby on my dresser, where I will always see her. How old is she now? She'll be needing some clothes soon, shoes. I wonder how I can get them to her.



Flowers | Kristi Beisecker

# Emily as Sometimes the Forest Wants the Fire

Darren C. Demaree

It's always in the morning,  
when the real quiet  
kisses the bark un-gently

& without bend or give,  
a sturdy loneliness finds pause,  
like a dancer in the tree-line

at sunrise, it will take great action  
to resume our steps. Could it  
be we need to run

from something, if only  
to build a good lather? We can  
call it dew, without panic.

## Winter Girls

Amy Waugh

Somewhere along the way, I set myself apart from the rest of my family. *They* were responsible for the position I was in—my life was not my own. One Christmas among many, my sister and I sat at Mom’s dining room table—the same one she’d had since before I was born. On the wall were her curio and spoon collections, which had hung behind us as I blew out the candle on my first birthday cake. Her house was in the town she grew up in in southwest Iowa, which she retreated to again after our failed mountain adventure. We’d had six years in Colorado, together, as a family, and now we were evolving backwards, it seemed. But we were safe here, sheltered, or so she would have us believe.

We looked at photographs from the golden years in Colorado of what used to be tradition: Mom and Dad carrying their presents in one tall stack out of the living room. Then it was Mom carrying her presents. And Dad carrying his presents. In separate houses. Now no one at all. Then there’s me, in the purple snowsuit and the three-sizes-too-big bright red goggles.

My sister in the ski lodge, drinking hot cocoa, getting boys' phone numbers. She pretended to hate the snow. She pretended to hate everything. I was the winter girl: building snowmen in the yard, our parents gone out and Tina locked in her room, phone cord trailing out from under the door.

I looked at my sister, searched for recognition. A cigarette hung from her mouth. I had quit a year prior. We looked nothing alike. Her hair was dyed maroon; mine was dark as ever. She used to be the pretty one. The cheerleader. I had always wanted to *be* her, but she never knew it. Now she scrutinized my perfectly shaped ass as she walked by on her way to the kitchen. “*God*, you’re so *skinny*,” she said. Perfect is what she meant. If only she knew.

We had mixed drinks in the kitchen. Southern Comfort and a splash of cranberry juice. Mom’s was just the opposite. Tina’s somewhere in between. “So, girls....” We looked anywhere but at each other. I started thinking of triangles, how the third element always manages to upset the balance of duality. Mom. Tina. Amy. The third. In the other room, the baby was napping—my sister’s, not her first one.

“Why ain’t you got a boyfriend yet?” my sister asked me. She talks this way. Got her GED when she was twenty-nine. She had

to hit the only way she knew how. And even though they all thought I was unflappable, I felt it—still feel it. I collect moments like those.

*I ain't lookin'*, is what I wanted to say. Or, *Maybe I'm into chicks. You ever think of that?* But she wouldn't get it. And I love her too much. I'd feel the guilt for days. I'd sweat it out through my pores. I shrugged, chugged the drink. I over-exaggerated the sound of my satisfaction.

From where we sat, I could see the presents stacked under the tree in the living room. Their shiny paper, some gold curling ribbon. The mismatched decorations on the tree. Somewhere in that pile were the misshapen gifts that I brought. Probably hiding in the middle, toward the trunk. Somewhere in that pile was the blanket I bought for the baby I still didn't believe would live.

The sound of three women sipping our drinks was the loudest in the house at that moment. I wanted to be a child again, napping in the other room, like the baby who I still couldn't call by her name. I wanted to hold up my pain to the light like the injured finger my sister had slammed in the closet door when I was five; present it to Mom to kiss and make better. Instead, we swallowed our pain in liquid form and looked

anywhere but at each other, all of us listening hard for the small sounds an infant makes as she sighs and stirs slightly in sleep.

It's midnight. The wind is threatening to blow me away. The kind that only comes howling across the open prairies of the Midwest. A kid is missing from the college I attend in Ames, Iowa. A child, really. I could have known him, but I don't. The chill, it's getting to me, it's getting under my skin. Flash back to my mother turning to me, bewildered. "A forensic anthropologist? What does that mean?"

"It's alright, Mom," I say. "God just gave her body back to the land. She's in the river now, and the trees. And soon she'll be in the sky." Her fingers tighten and weld to mine, and we go and sit with my sister. The detective has tried to explain to my mother that they can't show her the body of my niece. But natural processes don't make sense to mothers—only to scientists like me. I take a deep breath and pull it way down to the bottom of the newly hollowed cavity in my chest. My mother's eyes are all over the room—on the ceiling, the floor, at me. In fact, all eyes in the room seem to be upon me. Reverting to instinct, to the language of the body, I grip her hand tighter in mine. I try to send the message through my fingertips, to make her understand. But she only cries harder in frustration.

On the other side of me, on the couch, my sister is a statue. My sister the gossip queen, the girl who led cheers and smacked her gum and did her best Cyndi Lauper in the living room. In my mind, because of some biblical reference imprinted long ago, I am convinced she has turned to stone, and if she speaks will crumble into sand. I have been to both coasts and across an ocean, but I have never seen distances such as these. Still, I am doing the best I can to cross them. At night, when everyone is gone, the three of us, the three birthstones on my mother's ring finger, huddle together in the same bed, under the same comforter, and I let them cry me to sleep.

I only saw her, held her, once. I drove the two hours to my mother's home on a cold January morning, just before the start of term. We stayed huddled inside the house: my mother, Madison and I. We were the designated babysitters while my sister was at work. She was just a few weeks old then and the first grandchild in the family. Nine pounds of sweet, soft skin. Her blue eyes were alert and rolling around the room, one of them a little lazy, giving her a dazed look of wonder. My mother would prop Madison on her forearm, her little legs dangling over the crook of Mom's elbow and they'd do what we called

“Grandma’s swing.” Madison would rise a few inches into the air and then the smile would come, the small squeal of delight.

When I laid her down for a nap, a little later, I stretched out next to her on the bed, brushed my lips across her flushed cheek. I could smell my sister’s milk still on her face: pungent, but sweet. In a soft voice I laid out our plans for the coming years: the trip to the zoo, the bedroom I’d do up for her in my house. How I’d buy her a plane ticket to come and visit me, because even then I knew I was already on my way out of this place. I just didn’t know she was, too. That her father, who grew up broken and abused, was going to break and abuse his daughter, too.

A few weeks later: her funeral. In the sky, the clouds moved like time-lapse photography. We were an amoeba of dark cloth: slacks static-clinging to themselves at the crease, pantyhose bunching up around knees. From all over the state, we gathered like crows to stare at a white casket the size of a microwave, empty inside. A secret we kept from my sister. It was winter, and the animals were hungry. All that was left was a bit of bone. A remnant of a child who had appeared and disappeared so quickly it is sometimes hard to believe she were real at all.

In the parking lot, the chattering of teeth and words was carried away by the strong February breeze. My frozen fingers

wound around a thin ribbon of white, the string to a pink balloon that slid through my thumb and forefinger as I walked out onto the icy church driveway, one of hundreds floating up into the gray February sky.

The third drink went down smoother than the first. We were down to the dregs of the bottle. Mom was in her bedroom, stroking the new baby's cheek. Tina and I were still looking at old photographs. Our baby photos. And the photo of the one we lost, the one her unfortunate choice in men had taken from us.

I tried to be stoic: the webbing between our fingers as we gripped hands, and her tears soaked once more into my sweater, mixed with an earlier stain: her new child's drooled milk. I was silent, but I wanted to say, *Part of all of us died that day*. I wanted to tell her how I sometimes forget to breathe, when I think of that tiny triangular wedge of bone from my niece's skull that was all we were able to bury. Shaken until she was blue. Left alone out in the cold. I wanted to tell my sister how I sometimes dream of her kneeling in sweats by the snow, wiping Madison's headstone clean with her stubby fingers, nails bitten to the quick.

Look outside, Tina. The frost is forming on the windows. Look at the pictures. Remember building that snow fort, at our

old Colorado home? We were winter girls once. Always.  
Remember? We built those shelters and took refuge in them  
together.

# Helix Nebula, or Homage to the Argument \*

Emily Stoddard

Now, we  
as two comets  
having survived,

we see it as only  
a teaspoon,  
a white pinprick  
though

it weighs  
as much as  
an elephant,  
this beautiful  
blue aftermath,

the blowing off  
of our outer layers,  
the death of  
our star

no inner planet  
avoids the  
cosmic tantrum

I am

burned up  
swallowed

I am  
constellation Aquarius,  
poured out

but still  
I orbit with you  
in the blue  
dust storm  
that remains

trusting  
the blossom  
of every  
dying  
sun

\* found poem, source: [Helix Nebula, Unraveling at the Seams](#) (California Institute of Technology)

# Primer for the Docent of the Doubled Atrium/Ventricle Mechanism

Wryly T. McCutchen

I.

In the museum of the body  
the heart is considered the most staggering of bio-mechanical  
marvels;  
The Mona Lisa of our soft insular world,  
because it is and can so often  
be stolen.

II.

As some of you may know  
from visits to dimmer  
less sacred bodies,  
a museum without its centerpiece leeches ennui  
into its very floorboards.  
Longing hangs heavy in the doorways,  
A structure without a hearty pump is merely a deathbed nicely  
adorned.

III.

In infancy the heart develops at breakneck speed  
its complexity coils quickly  
week after week after week after week  
and then punches a smallish

heart-shaped hole on the ultrasound.  
It begins to mimic beats instantly  
And when fully grown  
can recognize and match the rhythms  
of its kin from several fathoms apart.

#### IV.

Interestingly enough, the inspiring allure  
hearts so easily harbor  
has little to do with the technique & design of the heart itself.  
The heart's allure is most reliably conjured up  
by the frequency with which it has been stolen away  
to collect adventure and bruises at the hands of gentle  
highwaymen.  
Everyone loves a heart with a bit of a renegade past.

#### V.

Although not the oldest piece in our collection  
(i) that would be the digestive tract  
which opened first as a tunnel of folded over flesh and yolk  
and then become the basement & foundation  
home to cave paintings and sculptures burbling in porous stone  
& prehistory,  
Nor is the heart the softest part  
(ii) that would be the liver.  
Cynics love the liver,  
and idolize its dingy dance into martyrdom.  
Inscribed below the liver exhibit (in both russian & english) are  
the words:  
“I am a sick man. I am a spiteful man”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> First line of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Original Russian reads “Я человек больной... Я злой человек.” Its exact translation has been held in contention for decades.

Contrary to popular belief the heart is not the most sensitive part  
of the body either,  
(iii) that would be the tissue on genitals and lips.  
while not above a hearty tingle or two,  
an organ as central and magnanimous as the heart  
knows not to horde sensational currents  
and releases to the lips  
a rush of hot-blood encouragement.

#### VI.

While it isn't the most sensitive,  
the heart is perhaps the organ most often damaged;  
the piece of the machine  
susceptible to the widest array of possible pains inflicted.

#### VII.

It is important to note that because of the high sensitivity  
the heart has developed  
an endurance for lengthy & catastrophic discomfort  
as well as an incredible resilience seen nowhere else in the body.

#### VIII.

Weighing in at less than a pound,  
it has strength enough to move masses  
up to 3,000 times its own weight.  
The four chambers of its miraculous architecture  
were built with equal parts openness and solid musculature  
and then duplicated  
ventricle for ventricle  
atrium for atrium.  
specifically designed to support itself  
when one of its four rooms have been  
ravaged,  
poisoned,

or  
occupied by dangerous intents.  
A heart with four intentions will  
never fold or break,  
it can only be bruised.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Seeded from Buddy Wakefield's poem *We Were Emergencies*. "...hearts don't break,/ y'all,/ they bruise and get better."

## Wing Walker

### Guinotte Wise

I'd had a librarian fantasy since I was a sophomore in high school, and I'd watched Mrs. Limbaugh walk between the tall shelves with her cart, replacing books when she didn't have a couple of girls helping her. When she reached up high, and stood on her toes, you could kind of see her butt muscles flex, and her blouse tighten over her bra. She wore skirts like the girls did, pencil skirts they called them, and, in my mind, her nylons whispered to me as she walked briskly back and forth.

Sometimes when her excused-from-gym girl helpers were with her, they'd all be in the back shelves and they'd break out in quiet snuffling laughter, the kind that said what we're laughing about is maybe dirty or sexy.

I had her sign her picture in my yearbook when I graduated last May. She seemed surprised and asked my name. I thought she knew it. Anyway she wore tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses on a chain and she moved in a way that compelled watching. So I had a librarian fantasy like a lot of guys, and also a Catholic girl in plaid skirt fantasy after older guys told me about them. But all

fantasies were replaced by an aerial photographer fantasy. And all others forever dimmed.

I live on my dad's farm right now. Sort of a temporary caretaker. I used to live here as a kid. My mom had moved back to the city, when I was little. She took me with her. My dad came, too, later. I don't really remember much about it. I had some ducks when we all lived on the farm; she named them Fubar and Snafu, I remember that. I found out what that means, so I guess what I'm telling next is probably true.

My old man and I were out at the farm checking pipes and closing it up for winter, talking, and he said my mom said, "Fuck this hayseed life, it's not for me." And she moved. I asked him, was that *actually* what she said, and he said, "Word for word. I swear it." And he laughed. "But don't ever tell her I told you that." I gulped, and tried to picture my mom saying it but could only see a cartoon of her that looked like Blondie, and a thought balloon that said those words. I felt guilty seeing even that. I'd had fantasies about Blondie earlier in my life.

Anyway, I'm taking a year off before college, and making my '42 Ford the fastest car in the western free non-commie world, as my old man says, then I'll go to college in 1959, driving my fast car. It's in the barn and I'm almost done putting a '57 Canadian Ford truck engine in it, bored 80 over, Iskendarian

cam, to replace the old vapor-locking flathead, and once that's done, then I'm really getting down to business. Heads. Carbs. Mallory Ignition. Quick change rear end. Pipes with cutouts you can pull at the dash. It's lowered and painted a bright magenta, but that might change. The other day at a stoplight an old fart in a Plymouth said, "Looks like a Easter egg," and cackled. It's sort of bulbous and maybe even egg-shaped with that round ass end. But it's classic. Like I said, maybe paint it primer, and with a hood scoop on it, it won't look like any Easter egg. Maybe I'm too sensitive. Old guys should just shut the fuck up in my opinion. Or impart great wisdom. Which I'm seeing that fewer and fewer old guys have any.

So, the farm. I guess it's maybe forty plus acres. The old man was never a farmer, said he couldn't stand the hours and laughed. He just had the idea he wanted to live away from the city, and he did for a while. The house is small, old, propane for heat, front porch sags, new roof, old one leaked too bad. Nice barn with a chain hoist and strong rail for the pulley. Couple sheds. Overgrown fields where someone once grew soybeans, now home to a lot of doves, quail, turkeys. The old man brings a dog out and hunts in the fall. Rip is our German Shorthair pointer, pretty old, but still loves the fields.

I like it out here when the weather's good, but it's too hot and too cold otherwise.

There's no real caretaker work for me to do here, except the painting—and that's how I finance my coupe. This summer I'm painting the house, barn and outbuildings. My folks are going to sell the place. So it's not like I'm a real caretaker. No livestock, no tractor, a rickety riding mower that I trim the lawn with—and the “lawn” is wherever I want it to be, around the house. I did insulate the north wall down by the pipes, drywalled the bedroom. Coyotes raise hell at dusk and early morning. And I can understand why my mom got out, sure can.

I can drink beer here, and smoke, maybe could at home too, but I don't know that. And I read a lot. Listen to records on a 33 they got me for my birthday. There's a TV that works sometimes, black and white, I watch Dragnet when it's on and the rabbit ears work. It's kind of like an odd vacation; lonely, but I have my car to work on, and the desire to get it running again so I can get away from here nights when I feel like it. I paint most mornings. No hurry on that. I have all summer. The scraping is the worst part and it's almost all done. The painting is mindless, okay work. Under the eaves, I had to get the wasps' nests out, but otherwise okay.

I was having a beer on the front porch, feet up on the railing, sitting in an old kitchen chair rocked back on its hind two legs, when a plane went over low. Really low. I stood, looked up as a great-looking little piston aircraft, a colorful red and yellow biplane, looked like a stunt plane, or one of those racer planes, flew over the house, then climbed and turned, came back over the main pasture, turned again, flew over the barn. Whoever was flying it seemed preoccupied with the little farm, and made more passes over it. I took a leak over the railing while watching it. Finally it flew away and I sat back down, forgot about it. I had one of the more dramatic records on the player, *Victory at Sea*, something my mom bought with the stereo, and I did kind of like it. It was on loud inside the house, so I could hear it on the porch. It was a long-play album, and I smoked and drank while it boomed movie-type music out into the yard. I felt pretty good, what with the beer buzz and the plane and the symphonic crash of the music. I waved my arms like a conductor and whirled about on the porch. The buzz was sharp-edged and perfect, and so was I.

When the buzz died down I felt a little guilty, because my coupe was sitting in the barn, drive shaft lying in the dirt, waiting for me to tighten down the motor mounts, hook that Canadian Ford up to it. It wasn't getting done this way. And I'd be itching

to get to town sometime soon. There was a lot of grunt work to do just to get it running and I'm lazy some days. I want to get the painting done before it gets too hot out here; getting a pretty good tan as it is.

A week or two later, the coupe was sitting out front, the barn was mostly painted, and I was on the porch again with a beer, *Victory at Sea* booming away inside. I need to get more records but I don't have money for stuff other than the car and groceries right now. But, this is the life, I was thinking, when a car turned into the gravel drive, crunching to a stop behind the coupe.

It was a 1956 Ford two tone, black and white, hard top convertible they called them, even though the top didn't go down. It had minimum pillars, and this one had a plexiglas half top from the front to midway back on the roof. Pretty snazzy looking car. A woman was behind the wheel. She waved, and started rummaging around on the back seat for something. I saw she was wearing shorts since her rear end was all that was visible for a moment, until she found what she was searching for. I stood up, put my beer down, and walked halfway out there. I had on a pair of cutoff jeans and some sneakers, was all, but it was my house so to speak. I didn't dress for company. When she got out of the car I saw she was about twenty-five and good looking. Really good looking. Sleeveless blouse, shorts and those

ballet type shoes the girls all wore. Her hair was black in a pageboy, eyes green, skin kind of olive like Italian or something. She was gorgeous. Like Elizabeth Taylor. Movie gorgeous.

She walked right up to where I was standing; she was carrying a large envelope and some papers and a framed picture, maybe one foot by two foot. I stood with my hands in my front pockets.

“This your place?” She looked around, gestured with the big envelope.

“Sort of.” I started to explain, but she went on.

“Want to see some pictures of it?”

“Sure,” I said. “Come on up to the porch.” I moved a wicker table and another chair over by mine, picked up my beer from the railing. I held it up, said, “Want a beer? Or ice water, or a Coke or something?”

“Love a beer, thanks.” She sat in the chair and laid the picture face down on the table, put the other stuff on it.

From inside I noticed she looked at her face in a mirror compact, snapped it shut and put it back in a little clutch purse she’d brought up with her. Then she took ahold of the front of her sleeveless blouse and fluttered it as though it might be sticking to her.

“Thanks. What’s that music?” she asked, when I handed her a cold beer.

“Victory at Sea,” I said.

“Beautiful.” She took a sip of the beer. “I’m Nancy Graves. Aerial photographer.” She handed me a card she must have taken from her purse with the compact.

I held it, studied it, said, “Billy, uh Bill Altaire.” She put out her hand and I shook it and we held hands like that for a little bit. Seemed right.

“Nice to meet you, Bill.” Something about the combination of her bright eyes and the quickness of her smile to come and go unsettled me some. And she kept shaking her head as though trying to get rid of a thought, or summon one up.

“Pictures,” she said, and our hands fell apart.

Suddenly it clicked, the little sport biplane, that was what it was doing, taking pictures. She opened the envelope and spilled some photos out on the wicker table. Some fell on the floor and we both went after them at the same time which occasioned me to bump my head on hers and also get a quick flash of breasts under her shirt. Her hair smelled like barroom smoke and soap. I sensed time slowing to a crawl. We laughed. I felt some heat in my face and elsewhere.

The pictures were sharp. There was the barn. The fields, neatly bordered by tree line and old fence. The outbuildings. A longer shot with the county roads crisscrossing. The house. Me peeing off the porch. I took that one and examined it closely.

“You took these?”

“I took ‘em.”

“Who flew the plane?”

“Me. I’m quick and I’m good. I have a blowup of you. Your stream needs to be more clear. You should drink more water during the day. All people should but nobody really knows that.”

How intimate, I thought. We could be a married couple. My stream.

“What kind of plane is that?”

“Old Stearman cropduster, but it’s been souped up plenty. Pratt and Whitney R-985, constant speed prop. Custom paint. Rehabbed prop to tail. I race, powder puff. Aerobatics. I wing-walk. I did it naked in Iowa and got banned. Which was silly because no one could really see me but the girl flying it.”

I looked at her. I could see her naked on the wide wing, leaning into the wind. Man oh man oh Maneshcevit, as my old man would say. It was a wine slogan.

“Do you hold on to anything?”

“With my feet. Couple straps up there. I don’t actually walk, except getting up there.”

“Then you’re a hood ornament, sort of,” I said.

“Yeah, exactly! Rolls Royce. That’s me.” She laughed and leaned forward, breasts out, head up, hands at her sides. I was deeply in love. For an anniversary I would give her a gold-plated Rolls hood ornament. I would learn to fly immediately. I would sell my coupe, my soul, for the lessons. I was jittery. My coupe? Jeezo, what is going on here?

“You like the pictures?” Her question brought me back.

“Yeah, I do. But the owner is going to sell this place so, I don’t think...”

“Better yet,” she said. “Pictures like these are a great vehicle for selling, shows people what they’re getting in a view few ever see.”

“Well...”

“Ask the owner. Show him. He can have these for less than a hundred bucks. I’ll make him a deal.”

“That’s pretty expensive for an old farmhouse.”

“Okay,” she said, looking a little miffed. “I’ll sell him the whole thing for fifty bucks. And that includes the framed picture of the farmhouse and surrounding area...”

She drained about half her beer, then arranged the pictures on the floor in sections, changing one with another like a deck of cards in suits. I was entranced, watching her down on all fours, then up, then down on one knee. She propped the framed picture on the floor against the table, at the top of the arrangement, and slid her hands against one another a couple times, looked at me.

“Well? Aren’t you going to look at them?”

She had a leaf on one knee from the porch floor. I wanted to carry her off. I hunkered down, looking from one photo to another.

“Now those are just crappy prints on cheap paper. The real ones will be like photos you see in the drugstore.”

“They look pretty good to me. Must be hard steering and taking pictures.”

“There’s a trick to it, all right.”

She was standing next to me, bare legs so close I could see the darker pores and texture of her skin, smell her warmth; a mixture of perfume and perspiration, maybe some airplane fuel.

“Well, gotta run, Bill. Tell you what, you sell the owner on these and I’ll give you ten bucks commission. So, forty bucks now, and I’ll send you the finished work special delivery. You keep the framed print. How’s that?”

When I didn't answer, she said, "The framed print is worth fifty all by itself. My art photos get more than that in a gallery show." She finished her beer and bent over toward me, picking up the prints off the floor. I could see her breasts and I think she knew it. The music from *Victory at Sea* hit a crescendo and she stood suddenly, then sort of wavered and dropped all the prints.

She seemed in a trance and started to fall. "I, uh, aahhh..." she said, or something like it, and fell. I caught her and laid her down on the porch floor where she began to stiffen and thrash some; I knew what it was, I'd seen it in science class in junior high school. Epilepsy. A kid had gone down off his stool and hit the floor during an experiment of some kind. The teacher had quickly put a rolled up cloth in his mouth, crossways, and later told us it was to keep him from biting his tongue. I grabbed some of the proofs and rolled them tightly, but couldn't get her jaw unclenched. Her tongue was inside her teeth so it didn't look like she'd bite it.

I felt helpless. Should I raise her head? Shit, I couldn't remember anything else the science teacher had done, maybe nothing. I couldn't remember. Then she relaxed and her eyes opened. I was conscious of having held my breath for a long time, and let out an explosion of air, and said "Oh, God," at the same time.

“What?” she said, confused. “What?” Then she seemed cold and frightened and held her arms, sat up.

“You had a...I don’t know, a sort of, you passed out,” I said.

“I have to get out of here,” she said. I started to help her up and she scooted back, said, “Don’t!”

I stopped and put my hands up. Maybe she thought I’d messed with her somehow. Maybe she thought the beer was spiked or something.

She relaxed some. “I’ll be all right,” she said. “I missed taking a pill, then beer, nothing to eat, and the music, yes the music...”

I hurried inside and turned the stereo off.

She was still hugging herself and sitting on the floor when I came back. “Bells have set me off before, sound stimulus. It’s ep...it’s a seizure is all, not often, doesn’t happen that much...”

“Can I get you anything? A cold wet towel?” I thought of her flying and all the stimuluses, stimuli, that could have. Even driving. Then that awful joke came floating into my mind, the one where they tie an epileptic girl to a bed during a fit, and the guy climbs on and says “Okay, cut her loose!” I looked away from her and swallowed. She looked, seemed so vulnerable. Forgive me, Lord. If I ever went to confession again, how many Hail Marys would that be worth.

“So sound can do this?” I said.

“Only if I’m really, really stupid. Like not taking medicine. Then not eating. Then drinking alcohol. It takes a number of things. I should have known, I had warning a couple times...”

“Warning?”

“Like mood changes, getting annoyed, weird feeling—for no reason.” She sat Indian-style on the floor; I did the same across from her.

“I need to eat something,” she said. I made her a fried egg sandwich and poured some milk that was still good. Or at least not “blinky,” as my mom says when she sniffs a turning milk bottle. I toasted the bread as it might be a little stale, then I cut the sandwich in half so it was triangles. My mom stopped by with groceries sometimes, and I drove into town for things. I just hoped she wouldn’t show up now. The phone had been disconnected long ago. Nancy lit a cigarette after eating most of the sandwich and we talked for a long time at the kitchen table.



In bed, hours later, she said “Billy. You are Billy, not Bill.”

“What does that mean?” I said, a little defensively. I rolled over half on top of her, looked into those eyes, saw freckles under them and on her nose I hadn’t noticed before.

“It only means Billy is what you are. Blll is anybody. Bill is boring. Be Billy, always.”

“All right.” I kissed her. I was a little embarrassed about the state of my room, but at least it was newly drywalled and painted, and it smelled chemical and clean. I hoped those weren’t stimuli.

I was glad I wasn’t a virgin, but we also did things I hadn’t done before, only heard about. They seemed to come quite naturally.



She wouldn’t tell me where she lived, but she let me come to the little airport where she kept Byrd, the biplane, on Wednesdays. The mechanics at the county airport liked the coupe, and the color, too. When I first showed up out there, two of them, Herschel and Ike, came over and asked questions about it. Johnson County wasn’t developed back then, and they

called the airport Plowed Ground. The farm was even farther out than the airport. I had to drive my coupe over gravel roads to get there and picked up new rattles with each trip, so I didn't just drive out there unless I was pretty sure she'd be there.

I found out she was the daughter of some big shot at Boeing over in Wichita, that he'd bought her the car, but didn't like her flying.

I'd paid for the pictures out of my painting money, we agreed on thirty bucks, and hadn't showed them to my dad yet, although I'd had the chance when he came out to look at the progress. Trouble is, the pictures of the buildings had a patchwork look being in the middle of painting and scraping. Nancy said she'd come back and shoot it again for free. Then I could sell him those. Luckily he fronted me some more money, but not enough for supplies and the high compression heads I wanted. They could wait. A man has to eat, smoke, drink beer, buy fresh milk.

Up on the ladder painting, I had a patch left about six foot by ten foot on the barn and I'd be done with it. A plane flew over, high, not Nancy, but the sound of it buzzing along in the almost cloudless blue sky pulled at my heart. I finished up and tapped the lid onto the paint can, squirting red paint onto my sneaker. I washed the brush out at the pump hydrant and laid it on the can,

washed myself off at the hydrant naked. I walked around in nothing but my sneakers to dry off in the sun, thinking you couldn't do this in the city.

Then I gathered up my shorts and underwear, went to the house like that. I put on *Victory at Sea* and got a hard-on. Stimulus. Nancy and *Victory at Sea*. I danced around the kitchen, into the tiny parlor. A horn honked out front. My mom. She never honked—oh shit, she must have seen me, gone back to the car. I hopped around trying to get my shorts on, fell over. Fuck! I don't think I had the boner when I danced into the front of the house. But I was naked.

I went out on the porch and waved at her, walked to the car. Casual. Red-faced, I could feel it. She was opening the trunk. Maybe she hadn't seen me.

"Brought you some groceries, hon. And some frozen TV dinners in a cooler. I hope there's room in the little freezer in that old fridge." She handed me a bag and opened the cooler, took out a little stack of flat packages.

We had to chip the ice out of the freezer compartment with a hammer and screwdriver, but we got the packages in there, cleaned up the mess.

"You need some dish towels," she said, eyeing the sink. "Do you *ever* wash dishes?"

“Sure. You just caught me at a bad time, Mom...”

That’s when she exploded with laughter, like she’d been holding it in. “I know, Nature Boy. Farm life seems to appeal to you...” Then she kissed my flaming red face, held it with both hands. “Oh, Billy,” she said and laughed some more. “I’m not laughing at you, I’m...laughing at you!” and she laughed again, high tinkling laughter, the kind that makes others laugh, wiping laugh tears away.

I started laughing, too. God, I was embarrassed. We sort of hugged, hiding our embarrassment, shaking still.



Wednesday dawned a good clear picture morning so I knew she’d be out at the airport getting her plane ready. The coupe was running good and I’d de-rattled all the little rattling places with shims and tightening; I started it and listened to the pipes, revved it and heard the air rushing into the little air cleaner on top of the quad carb. The Smitty mufflers popped when I let off the gas. “Ready fucking teddy,” I shouted and threw gravel as I pulled out, turning the radio on in the middle of “It’s Only Make

Believe” by Conway Twitty. I turned it up, sang along and goosed the coupe when I got to the asphalt.



I saw Herschel and Ike in their gray coveralls, talking to a cop, next to a Johnson County Sheriff’s patrol car. Nancy’s Ford was parked by the hangar where she kept Byrd. I waved at Herschel who looked at me, then down at the ground, not waving back. I parked by Nancy’s car. The dark hangar housed two other small planes but hers was gone. I walked back out into the sun, saw the three men coming toward me. I knew then.

I could tell it this way. I could say I was numb and didn’t run back into the hangar and slide the big doors shut, and run to the man-door and try to lock it before they forced their way in. I could say I didn’t shout and scream and evade their clutches and whirl and yell “Fuck you!” and “Shut up, shut up, shut up!” and kick and throw anything I could find at them before I was subdued. I could say I experienced all the predictable stages of grief in the following months and understood them all. I could even say Nancy had a seizure before she “augured in,” as

Herschel put it, without meaning to be ironic or cruel at all. He was just an air guy. It's how they talk.

I could say time has softened the edges of memory and that I don't first think of the freckles on her nose, and then her breasts, when I think of her. I never thought of where we were going, I just waited for Wednesdays or the odd day that she'd show up in the driveway of the old farmhouse. I knew she had a real life. I didn't know she was getting married to someone her old man approved.

What I know: she wing-walked on the top wing of a co-pilotless biplane on a beautiful sunny cloudless Wednesday, and she wore a wedding dress as she stood, arms at her sides, leaning into the wind.

# Gazer (See: *Navel* or *Star*)

Hannah Baggott

In pine wood campfire, I inhale my jacket, unwashed,  
soaking in bursts of freezing—

*stay younger, just a little longer*

When you took off your socks in haste upon finding my feet  
naked beside you in the tent,

the stars were out—night was up

We were too awake with it, holding back the hair  
of a rum-sick creature, laying everything to rest

under white dinner napkins

You kissed me quick over coffee in light of rain  
and no one saw and everything is okay

because no one saw

the arching of muscles and the vulnerability of mouth  
Some kind of brunette body doing brunette things,

already impure—marked, dark

You asked to see pictures of everything: car door bruises,  
unearthly straining of voice, winding fists,

metal dents, an unused wedding dress

that I never once tried on—nothing too white—ruining  
pillowcases with all the things we swear to never do again

# Appalachian

Mary Leauna Christensen

Her womb is a pile  
of mountain dirt—  
a sanguine color housing  
earthworms and budding with  
the soft shells of mushrooms.

The concave dips of her hips  
create fertile valleys which  
echo with the chirps of  
red-breasted males.

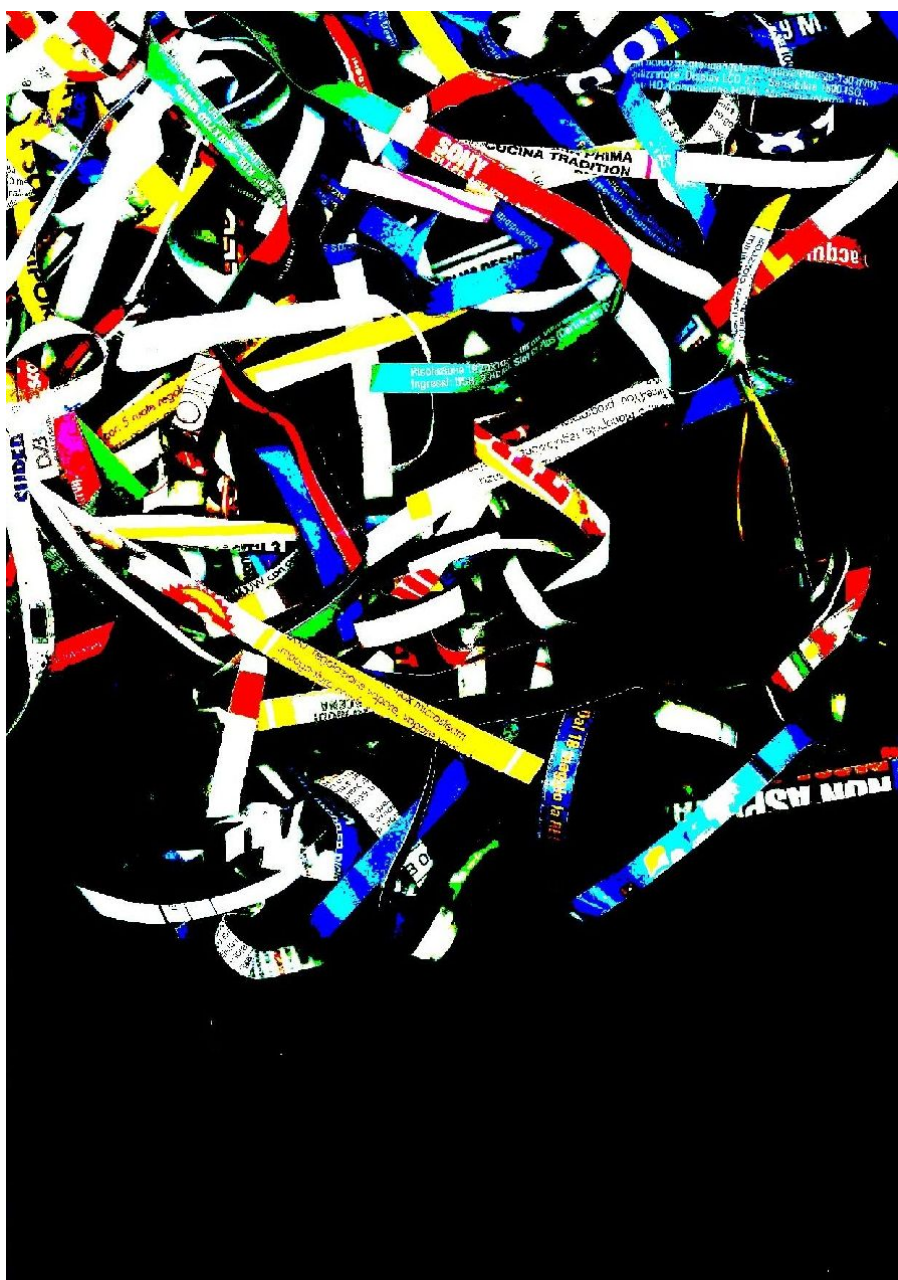
It is her ivory colored  
bark that protects fertilized  
soil from invasive species  
snaking through crevices  
dripping with kudzu.

It is the thinning down of  
her natural surfaces that causes  
erosion to break down hilly  
knees allowing them to  
quake and tremble at  
rough caresses.

She is resilient green fingers  
sprouting through concrete cracks  
tickling the fat toes of barefoot children.



Colourful Dreams | Dwarakanathan Ravi



Scraps | Fabio Sassi

# Bios

**Daniel Aristi** was born in Spain. He studied French Literature, and then Economics. He now lives in Botswana with his wife and two children and two cats. Daniel's work has been recently published in *Asymptote Journal* and *Berkeley Poetry Review*.

**Hannah Baggott** is a Nashville, TN, native currently pursuing an MFA in poetry at Oregon State University while teaching English Composition courses with a rhetorical focus on gender and media. She helps run a local open mic, Poetics Corvallis, at her favorite coffee shop and loves baking vegan & gluten-free deserts with her partner, Max. Her work can be found in *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Small Po[r]tions*, *Open Minds Quarterly*, *Julep: Journal of the Young South* and is forthcoming in other journals. Find her online at [hannahbaggott.com](http://hannahbaggott.com).

**Kristi Beisecker** is an artist who lives and works as a freelance graphic designer in Massachusetts. In her spare time she creates photograms using electricity and organic materials with analog darkroom processing. She also reads and writes about science and spirituality, composes and performs music and gives spiritual guidance through her psychic ability.

**Jan Bindas-Tenney** lives in a pink adobe house in Tucson, Arizona, where she is a MFA candidate in nonfiction at the University of Arizona. For the past ten years she was a labor and community organizer. She spent many years going on strike in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and driving circles around New Jersey trying to find lunch ladies to form their union. Jan is queer, working class; she loves to swim. Her essays have appeared in *CutBank* and *Squalorly Journal*, among other places.

**Matthew Bohn** lives in New York City, where he serves as associate editor for Lime Hawk Literary Arts Collective. He holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Chatham University, and his writing has appeared online with *Stymie Magazine*.

**Kevin Brown** is a Professor at Lee University. He has published three books of poetry: *Liturgical Calendar: Poems* (forthcoming from Wipf and Stock); *A Lexicon of Lost Words* (winner of the Violet Reed Haas Prize for Poetry, Snake Nation Press); and *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009). He also has a memoir, *Another Way: Finding Faith, Then Finding It Again*, and a book of scholarship, *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*. He received his MFA from Murray State University. You can find out more about him and his work at <http://www.kevinbrownwrites.com/>

**Mary Leana Christensen** is an Arizona native now residing in the mountains of Western North Carolina. Her poetry and prose have appeared in both *The Atlantis* and *The Nomad*. As of December 2014 she will have a Bachelors of Arts in English from Western Carolina University.

**Darren C. Demaree** is the author of *As We Refer to Our Bodies* (2013, 8th House), *Temporary Champions* (2014, Main Street Rag), and *Not For Art For Prayer* (2015, 8th House). He is the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and children.

**Kika Dorsey** lives in Boulder, Colorado, with her two children, husband, Border Collie, and two birds. She has a PhD in Comparative Literature and her poems have been published in *The Denver Quarterly*, *The California Quarterly*, *The Comstock Review*, *Freshwater*, *The Columbia Review*, among numerous other journals and books. Her articles have been translated and published in *Zwischen Distanz und Nahe* and online journals such as *Not Enough Night*. She is a professor of English Composition and Creative Writing at Front Range Community College. In 2010, her collection of poems, *Beside Herself*, was published by Flutter Press. Currently she is finishing her second book, *Rust*. When not writing or teaching, she loves to swim, run, and hike.

**Hannah Epstein** (AKA hanski) is a folk media artist working in the cross-section of experimental games and video art. Of mixed Latvian and Russian-Jewish heritage, Epstein draws on her liminal identity to drive a psychedelic and collage inspired aesthetic. As a trained folklorist, Epstein is critical of hierarchical power structures and aims to highlight the fringes of cultural practice. She is currently working on her MFA at Carnegie Mellon.

**Tyler Erlendson** is a documentary filmmaker, poet, and academic writing instructor. He received his MA at San Francisco State University in English Composition. He and his wife own a small farm in Sonoma County, California. They spend their time growing vegetables, raising chickens, and doing Labrador rescue. Tyler is a current student in the MFA program at Pacific University in Oregon.

**Krista Genevieve Farris'** recent work can be found or is forthcoming in *Literary Mama*, *The Literary Bohemian*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *The Rain, Party & Disaster Society* and *Tribeca Poetry Review*. She was born in Michigan and grew up in Indiana. She and her husband drove through Virginia on their honeymoon and decided to settle down in Winchester. They enjoy their Shenandoah Valley stomping grounds with their three sons. When Krista's not writing, she can be found running or digging in the dirt. She has an MA in Anthropology from Indiana University and a BA in English and Anthropology from Albion College.

**Leah Horlick** is a writer and poet from Saskatoon, SK. A 2012 Lambda Literary Fellow in Poetry, her writing has appeared in *So To Speak*, *Canadian Dimension*, *GRAIN*, *Poetry is Dead*, *Plenitude*, *Adrienne*, *CutBank*, and on Autostraddle. Her first collection of poetry, *Riot Lung* (Thistledown Press, 2012) was shortlisted for a 2013 ReLit Award and a Saskatchewan Book Award. She currently lives on Unceded Coast Salish Territories in Vancouver, where she co-curates REVERB, a queer and anti-oppressive reading series. Her next collection, *For Your Own Good*, is forthcoming from Caitlin Press in spring 2015.

**Clinton Van Inman** is a retired high school teacher. Born in England, he lives with his wife in Sun City Center.

**Daisy Johnson** is currently studying the Creative Writing MSt at Oxford University. Her poetry has been published in *The Charnel House*, a poetic graphic novel, the *Interpreters House*, *Vulture* magazine and *Catweazel*. She was commended in the Martin Starkie prize. Her fiction has also been published.

**Jhaki** is an accidental teacher by trade and an artist and writer by otherwise. Her work, both visual and written, relies on messy sessions, scraps and the type of aging that is only achieved through careful hoarding. Her birthplace in the Midwest was a conservative start to a life of wander. She's recently

settled down and commutes between Sweden and South Dakota. Her artwork and stories appear in *Metazen*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Weave Magazine*, *Number Eleven*, and elsewhere. Her artwork and a complete list of publications can be found at [www.jhakijhaki.com](http://www.jhakijhaki.com).

**Wryly T. McCutchen** is a working class, genderqueer writer whose formative adventures unfolded in the Puget Sound. They currently reside in Oakland with their partner & a feisty bike named Queen Bee. Wryly is often unsure of Wryly's preferred gender pronouns & probably wants to ride bikes with you instead of choosing. They love bikes & anything else with simple exposed mechanics. Wryly was a finalist in Write Bloody's 2013 publishing competition and has been published in *Wilde Magazine*, *Alive With Vigor*, and *Raven Chronicles*. If you ping Wryly's twitter (@Wendy\_RM) a roboghost might send something sweet to your mailbox.

**Michael Mira** is a writer, photographer and badass based in Houston. His writings and visual art have appeared in various publications, such as *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Identity Theory*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Bay Laurel*, among others.

**Tamer Mostafa** is a Stockton, California, native whose work has been affected by many, but directly influenced by the teachings of Joshua McKinney, Joe Wenderoth, and Alan Williamson. His work has appeared in past issues of *Confrontation*, *The Rag*, *Poets Espresso Review*, *SNReview*, and *Stone Highway Review*.

**Alicia Mountain** is a queer poet, teacher, student and activist in Missoula, Montana. Her work has been published in *Witness Magazine*, on the podcast *StoryTapes*, and is forthcoming in *Barrow Street* and *A&U Magazine*. She is the recent recipient of an Academy of American Poets Prize. Mountain's first collection of poetry is in the works.

**Joseph Pipolo** lives and teaches English in Huntington, New York. This piece of fiction is an excerpt from a nearly finished novel he is currently writing.

**Delia Rainey** is a student at the University of Missouri, where she studies creative writing and has interned at *The Missouri Review*. Her poems have appeared in *Blacktop Passages* and *Lowerlip Zine*. Delia plays in a folk band with her sisters and has a blog called Delia Writes A Poem A Day 2014.

**Dwarakanathan Ravi** resides in Chennai, India. A freelance photographer and budding writer, he has seen his poems published in *Wordweavers India* (2013) and *The Brown Boat* (2014), *The Bamboo Hut Press* (2014), *Intercontinental Anthology of Poetry on Universal Peace and Love* (2014), *brassbell haiku* (2014) and some of his artworks have appeared in *Bare Hands Poetry* (2014), *Contemporary Literary Review India* (2014), *Blue Monday Review* (2014), *World Haiku Association* (2014), *Daily Haiga* (2014), The 119th World Haiku Association Haiga Contest (2014), *A Hundred Gourds* (2014), *Cattails* (2014), *Taj Mahal Review* (2014), and *Estuary Magazine* (2014).

**Margaret Ries** has had two other short stories accepted for publication. “For Sale” appeared in *Green Hills Literary Lantern XX* and “Half Light” appeared in *Black Middens: New Writing Scotland* 31. She has completed two novels, *Shadow Jumping*, set in Seattle and Berlin, where she lived for 13 years, and *The Block of Joy*, about what happens when religion, fertility and sibling rivalry collide. An agent is currently reading *Shadow Jumping*. Fingers crossed she likes it! Margaret currently lives in Edinburgh.

**Nick R. Robinson** grew up in Junior Village, a D.C. government-run orphanage that was the largest institution of its kind in the U.S. Nick went on to work at IBM and Microsoft before leaving corporate America in 2006 to write his life story. He is currently a fifth-year University of Missouri PhD candidate living in Istanbul Turkey. “What *Was* Her Name?” is an excerpt from the final chapter of Nick’s in-progress dissertation/memoir, *My Family Walks*.

**Fabio Sassi** makes photos and acrylics using tiny objects and what is considered to have no worth by the mainstream. Fabio lives and works in Bologna, Italy. His work can be viewed at [www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com](http://www.fabiosassi.foliohd.com).

**Sierra Schepmann** is an actress, photographer, and writer in Los Angeles. She is originally from Cincinnati, Ohio. Her photography has been published in *Off the Coast*, *Skin 2 Skin*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *Glitterwolf* magazines. You can find her at [sierraschepmann.com](http://sierraschepmann.com).

**Emily Stoddard** writes poetry and fiction. Her work has appeared in *Big Scream*. She lives in San Francisco, where the Pacific, redwoods, and fog feed her appetite for wonder. She is also on Twitter: @emilystoddard.

**Amy Waugh** resides with her cat Gideon near Lake Superior, which serves as sometimes muse. She teaches professional writing at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and has just published her first book, a memoir entitled *Remnants of the Disappeared*, of which this essay was a part. Her poetry has appeared in journals such as *Mid-American Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Split Rock Review* (which she now serves as contributing editor for).

Winner, H. Palmer Hall Award for *Night Train, Cold Beer* (Pecan Grove Press, 2013), **Guinotte Wise**'s work has appeared in numerous literary journals including *Atticus*, *Opium* and *The MacGuffin*. His novel, *Ruined Days*, about badasses from a wildlife refuge battling savvy criminals in New Orleans, is under contract to be published in 2015. He is a sculptor, sometimes in welded steel, sometimes in words. Educated at Westminster College, U of Arkansas, Kansas City Art Institute, he remains degreeless, but for a self-awarded MFA, which means something far different than most. Tweet him @noirbut. Some work is at <http://www.wisesculpture.com/> His FB author page is <https://www.facebook.com/RenoPeteStCyr>

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