

# INSCAPE 2003

AN ANTHOLOGY

PASADENA CITY COLLEGE  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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2003

Volume 58  
Formerly *Pipes of Pan*: Volumes 1-29

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Department of English  
Pasadena City College

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Poet of the Year: T. Cole Rachel	7
surviving the moment of impact	9
the poem is	11
<i>T. Cole Rachel</i>	
Father	12
<i>Sheng Peng</i>	
Momentum	13
<i>Annie Wong</i>	
A Song for My Father	13
<i>Stephanie Brewer</i>	
Tabu	14
<i>Lee Fishback</i>	
Kamala at the River	15
<i>Christopher Scott</i>	
Of Mr. Cullen	16
<i>Sheng Peng</i>	
The Vegetable Girls	16
<i>Arielle Ceci</i>	
VIII	17
<i>Miguel Gutierrez</i>	
Tart	17
<i>Miss Chockie Tom</i>	
Pleasures	18
<i>Alessander</i>	
My Ten Dollar Bill	20
<i>Patrick Curl</i>	
"There is no"	21
<i>Janet Ramirez</i>	
The Occupational Penis	22
<i>Anita Snieszko</i>	
Restraint	26
<i>Sarah LaVoie</i>	

Soup Kitchen Poem #5	26	Traffic Jam	48
<i>Alessander</i>		<i>James Noon</i>	
Blue Eyes and Epilepsy	27	Half Ocelot	49
<i>Marina Duff</i>		<i>Arielle Ceci</i>	
“The poet”	27	Running	50
<i>Janet Ramirez</i>		<i>James Noon</i>	
With A Mustache Like That, Who Needs Enemies?	27	Looking for Louis’ Wonderful World	50
<i>Arielle Ceci</i>		<i>Dino Parenti</i>	
Too Red	28	City Deli	56
<i>Lenise Andrade</i>		<i>Gianpiero Leone</i>	
Petty Notes, 5-7	33	The First Sip	57
<i>Miss Chockie Tom</i>		<i>Lenise Andrade</i>	
White House	34	Husband	60
<i>Ryan Moore</i>		<i>Lisa Kelly</i>	
“Yesterday he still looked into my eyes”	35	Grandfather	60
<i>Taran Rose O’neill</i>		<i>Annalysse</i>	
Comfort	36	Mr. and Mrs.	61
<i>Tiffany Grejler</i>		<i>Stephani Torres</i>	
To La Guadalupe	37	Concerto #5	61
<i>Julia Casillas</i>		<i>Alessander</i>	
It Wouldn’t Have Bothered Her	38	Immortalized–Buchenwald	62
<i>Marina Duff</i>		<i>Nancy Hubbs-Chang</i>	
Harsh Reflections	39	The Moor	62
<i>Juliet Myrtetus</i>		<i>Stephanie Brewer</i>	
Being A Veggie in A Meaty World	42	Saying Good-bye	64
<i>Tracy Umana</i>		<i>Susan Ahdoot</i>	
Just Take It	44	The Conspiracy	65
<i>Lisa Kelly</i>		<i>Taylor Ludeke</i>	
A Fleeting Thought	45	Still, the Sirens Sing of Troy Burning in Men’s Hearts	68
<i>Taran Rose O’neill</i>		<i>Alessander</i>	
Nite Club	46	2030: An Easter Fantasy	69
<i>Miss Chockie Tom</i>		<i>Nancy Hubbs-Chang</i>	
Like Approaching the Guillotine	47	Before His Cremation	75
<i>Marina Duff</i>		<i>Patrick Curl</i>	
James Brown	48	About the Author	76
<i>Arielle Ceci</i>		<i>Tuli</i>	

Losing a Loved One: A Lesson in Grief and Recovery	76
<i>James Noon</i>	
Acknowledgments	80

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*Paul Solis*  
*Hazel Maureen Barr*  
*Keith Shono*  
*Miss Chockie Tom*  
*Jack Forrest*  
*Darryl Williams*  
*Hiro Westdorp*  
*Robert Bellm*  
*Shaun Garren*

## POET OF THE YEAR

*Inscape's Poet of the Year for 2003:*

**T. Cole Rachel**

*T. Cole Rachel grew up in Hydro, Oklahoma, and attended Southwestern Oklahoma University. He received his MFA from Wichita State University where he studied with Albert Goldbarth. Not knowing what to do next, he moved to New York City. The poetry in his first book of poems, *Surviving the Moment of Impact*, published by Soft Skull Press, has been called "blazingly hopeful verse."*

*And the staff of Inscape agrees. Congratulations to our newest Poet of the Year!*

The Writing Process: Why My Apartment is Always Clean

By T. Cole Rachel

I think most writers will tell you that writing itself is always a difficult and mysterious practice. Most will tell you that it's different for everyone, that everyone has their own process that works for them, their own cloudy and complicated motivations for pursuing a life dedicated to the often maddening pursuit of arranging and rearranging words in the hope that they'll engage or enrage, delight or inspire, or that they'll at least sound good, or that they *might* actually mean something. With this I would agree. In fact, I myself follow a very strict, but still somehow indefinable process by which I write things. For example, in order to produce this very short piece of prose I've found it necessary to follow some very critical and involved steps. First, I cleaned things in my apartment that didn't need to be cleaned (this included repeatedly "swifting" the floors and actually wiping down a pile of CDs that appeared unnervingly dusty), then I watched about two hours of reality television that didn't need to be watched, and followed up by finally turning on my computer. Before I could start writing, however, I felt compelled to give my very long-winded grandparents a very unnecessary phone call in

Thanks to Soft Skull Press for T. Cole Rachel's biography.



order to just “touch base” with them. Then, over an hour later and having nearly exhausted my options for avoidance, I sat down, typed out a few sentences and promptly headed to the kitchen to reward myself with a sandwich, at which point I ultimately decided that I had given it my best shot and it was best to just call it a day. This is fairly representative of how I generally work. I sit down to write and end up with shining floors, color-coded laundry, a bowl of pasta, and, if I’m lucky, the beginnings of a poem.

Despite the fact that I’ve chosen to work in an often ignored genre, and aside from the ever-present fear that I will never again write a successful poem, I’ve always felt incredibly lucky to do what I do. I love poems and I love to write them. And thankfully, I’ve always known that making poems is exactly what I wanted to do. From an early age I wrote stories and grew up knowing that, for better or worse, I would spend my life reading Walt Whitman and rearranging my furniture in an effort to be like him. I didn’t have to change my major a million times like some of my friends and I never disappointed my family by abandoning med school for an unlikely life in letters. From an early age, everyone knew where I was headed, that my eyes were trained on the most unmarketable of all college-degree futures, that of the English major. Even better (or worse), that of the mysterious, unfathomable, and most-likely, very unprofitable future of being a poet. I would never have had it any other way. Furthermore, I wouldn’t have even known how to have it any other way.

I’ve always seen my desire to write poems as a kind of offshoot of an early childhood curiosity. While some chose science or philosophy to explain the universe, or psychology as a means of understanding the human psyche, I wrote poems, which I still say is a much better way of figuring things out. I suppose that’s why I write them, and why I love them. Poems explain. They explore. They illuminate. And the only way I seem to have understood anything in this world is by making them.

## surviving the moment of impact

T. Cole Rachel

it’s like restaging a play, equal parts  
 rudnick and euripides, the protagonist  
*somewhere children grow up to be normal*  
 returns to his childhood home, all wood paneling  
 and farm implements, and is confronted, literally, figuratively  
*somewhere people pay bills and don’t lose sleep over*  
*paying for*  
*school pictures, 3 dollar lunches, antibiotics*  
 by the reality of his childhood, embodied by figurines  
 and old trees, nothing less surreal than a movie set, a backdrop  
*somewhere a city pulses like an artery, full of heat*  
 some created thing. he steals a cigarette  
 from his mother’s purse, retreating to the back porch  
*somewhere a boy dreams of kissing the football star,*  
*square on the*  
*mouth*  
 with only a tin pan of cat food and an eternity  
 of dumb, unmovably stars to stare at.

inside, the siblings sleep in their rooms, dreaming  
 of new cars and top 40 radio, the mother warms  
*somewhere kids are fucking on country roads, listening*  
*to heavy*  
*metal, hiding beer in their glove boxes*  
 the kitchen, turns on the oven, busy in the act  
 of making something out of nothing. he smokes  
*somewhere old classmates are making their parents*  
*happy,*  
*enjoying a life full of sport utility vehicles and endless,*  
*beautiful*  
*babies*  
 on the porch, the house behind him a thing  
 perpetually burning, and suddenly he is 14, sneaking out

*somewhere people are doing what they really want*  
with no place to go, imagining a thing bigger  
than this dirt and one tree—a world that moves  
*somewhere there is something more faithful than tele-*  
*vision*  
and is knowable, a place not teetering  
on the edge of collapse.

so, he comes back to this spot, pulled  
by an innate need to fix things  
*somewhere people don't secretly fantasize about death*  
that stay broken, to be the good son,  
the good brother, the good person, again  
*somewhere religion isn't a substitute for thinking*  
again and again, confident  
in the knowledge that he cannot save them  
*somewhere people are being forgiven*  
from burning houses, tornadoes, divorces, propane bills  
or the ceaselessness of struggle, the blow, the head-on  
collision that has become their collective lives.

so, they wave from the house, the props are all left in place  
as he drives down brown gravel to the spot  
*somewhere people leave and don't look back*  
where dirt gives way to asphalt, highway  
interstate—something far away from canyons of  
*somewhere someone isn't compelled to make sense of it*  
*in a poem*  
red dirt and the violence of lifelong despair,  
a place where he forgets about solution and resolution, his  
mind always  
preoccupied by the unlimited possibilities of failure.  
*somewhere the world is not like this*

## the poem is

T. Cole Rachel

not always your friend, it is not  
the roomie who holds back your hair  
as you vomit your insides onto white  
notebook paper, it prefers  
to hold your head down  
in the toilet that is your life  
and flush repeatedly

it makes you tell the truth, possibly  
wringing out horrible things  
about your family  
it mocks you  
with the artifice of love  
it exposes with deadly accuracy  
the nature of your frailty  
it climbs to places just out of reach, saying  
you are not good enough to write me  
you are a coward

and then, when you think this poem  
has gone, it raises the blinds  
and wakes you, begging  
shut up and look, you idiot  
look, just for a moment  
at how beautiful we can become

Poems by T. Cole Rachel from *Surviving the Moment of Impact*.  
Reprinted with permission from the author.

## Father

---

Sheng Peng

*A servant aboard the mother ship, which cruises sparkling seas.  
Meeting a catastrophic "accident," the mother ship sinks, stranding the  
servant on a raft.*

8 days since.  
Drifting, I survive on canteens.  
Noon sun sings—need somebody—  
talking to me:

yesterday, when I woke  
an arduous wind turned me over,  
I tried turning the raft back, but then  
I felt a firm hand grip my foot,  
dragging me  
under—

I beat my arms like a hummingbird  
water rushed me;  
I remembered swimming lessons from cousin Grace  
as a child—

I didn't know how to breathe . . .

one violent lunge, last of my strength—  
and I kicked free of the invisible grip.

And looking down  
breath failing but near light,  
I saw a mermaid flame-haired,  
I swear,  
fading to  
the abyss  
beckoning,  
farewell.

Did I dream this? I cannot say.  
But I did fall.  
And was almost saved.

## Momentum

---

Annie Wong

How insignificant is this vessel  
That houses what moves beyond  
The capacity of existence

What great burden are dreams  
That they first light,  
Then extinguish the heart of stars

Where does the accumulation of time  
Ever lose itself,  
So that finally we can stop  
And re-find ourselves?

## A Song for My Father

---

Stephanie Brewer

In the coldest days of May, I have struggled to find myself  
amongst the withered lilies.  
I don't have a green thumb . . .  
My roses always change colors . . . from red to yellow and back  
again.  
Your brown eyes are gonna get all murky just wishing there  
were two/five/ten of me  
I hear a dissonant song in triple meter, almost like he's chasing  
me,



But it's in my head. One leg is longer than the other  
 He can't keep up with my thoughts. That strait jacket doesn't  
     fit like it used to . . .  
 I think I'm getting smaller . . . the buckles are very loose.  
 My memory is too spotty to give specific dates,  
 But I do remember crying when my flowers died.  
 Could I please have a spoonful of the tincture everyone else  
     has, so I can be like them?  
 Healed? Perhaps . . . It was of my own doing, but I will never  
     forget.  
 Somewhere in the recesses of my imagination I needed you,  
     john . . .  
 Somewhere . . . I promise.

## **Tabu**

Lee Fishback

*Tabu: an evening scent created in 1931.*

Momma, I conjure you up with your own scent  
 above my bed, you become a moving presence  
 released from the immobile bloat of your body.

I was not allowed to touch it.  
 Square shouldered and firm it squatted  
 next to sour boxes filled with pearls from your prime.  
 "Grown women, only," you growled,  
 when I reached for the secret of the mysterious liquid.

You applied it liberally,  
 one of your few generous acts  
 saved up for special occasions  
 and so it sat, choked in the dust  
 of so many occasions never special enough.

Touching it cloaked my fingers in bone-white dust  
 and opened prints on the surface:  
 marks that not only Momma could see, but others, too,  
 and that was living dangerously.

And now, your white locks still shining,  
 you slowly turn to dust in your best  
 "save-it-up-for-a-special-occasion" dress  
 and the dark, pungent grave isn't saving it up  
 for anything at all.

I immerse myself in your Tabu.  
 I draw it over my body  
 in places no one is supposed to smell and  
 I linger at my own touch and  
 I've left marks, Momma,  
 on shoulders,  
 and I've been marked and  
 I've allowed their presence to linger long  
 after they've gone and  
 I feel blessed by it all.

## **Kamala at the River**

Christopher Scott

She glided in on the melting ice  
 Sculptures of her previous lovers  
 And with one sweaty, naked, outstretched  
 Arm, she stroked and caressed my  
 Insecurities  
 With such delicacy and assuredness  
 That I became too cocky  
 To even wonder what kind of -ness  
 Might be cupped in her other hand.

**Of Mr. Cullen**

---

Sheng Peng

I didn't realize  
but for weeks I'd been watching him.  
Cataloging his boring gingham shirts  
collegiate, handsome face  
his modest build;  
stirring him in my stew  
with Kathy's blooming blush  
Ruby's serene smile  
Lynette's long, powerful legs.  
And it was a California winter,  
in that gray classroom.  
A monochrome Escher poster floated beyond  
the white board.  
He was graphing a right angle  
azure gingham shirt tucked  
into his tight  
tight jeans,  
saying something.  
He turned  
our eyes met—  
I licked my lips.  
And he shuddered.  
And I shuddered.

**The Vegetable Girls**

---

Arielle Ceci

I hear from them every now and then:  
"Candi used a carrot!"

"Cheryl used a cucumber!"  
"Watch Vicki manhandle that pickle!"

This time, I only had a green bell pepper  
Taut and hollow  
and squeaky when rubbed.

I chopped it up nice.

Candi dropped her carrot  
and Cheryl's mouth started to water.

**VIII**

---

Miguel Gutierrez

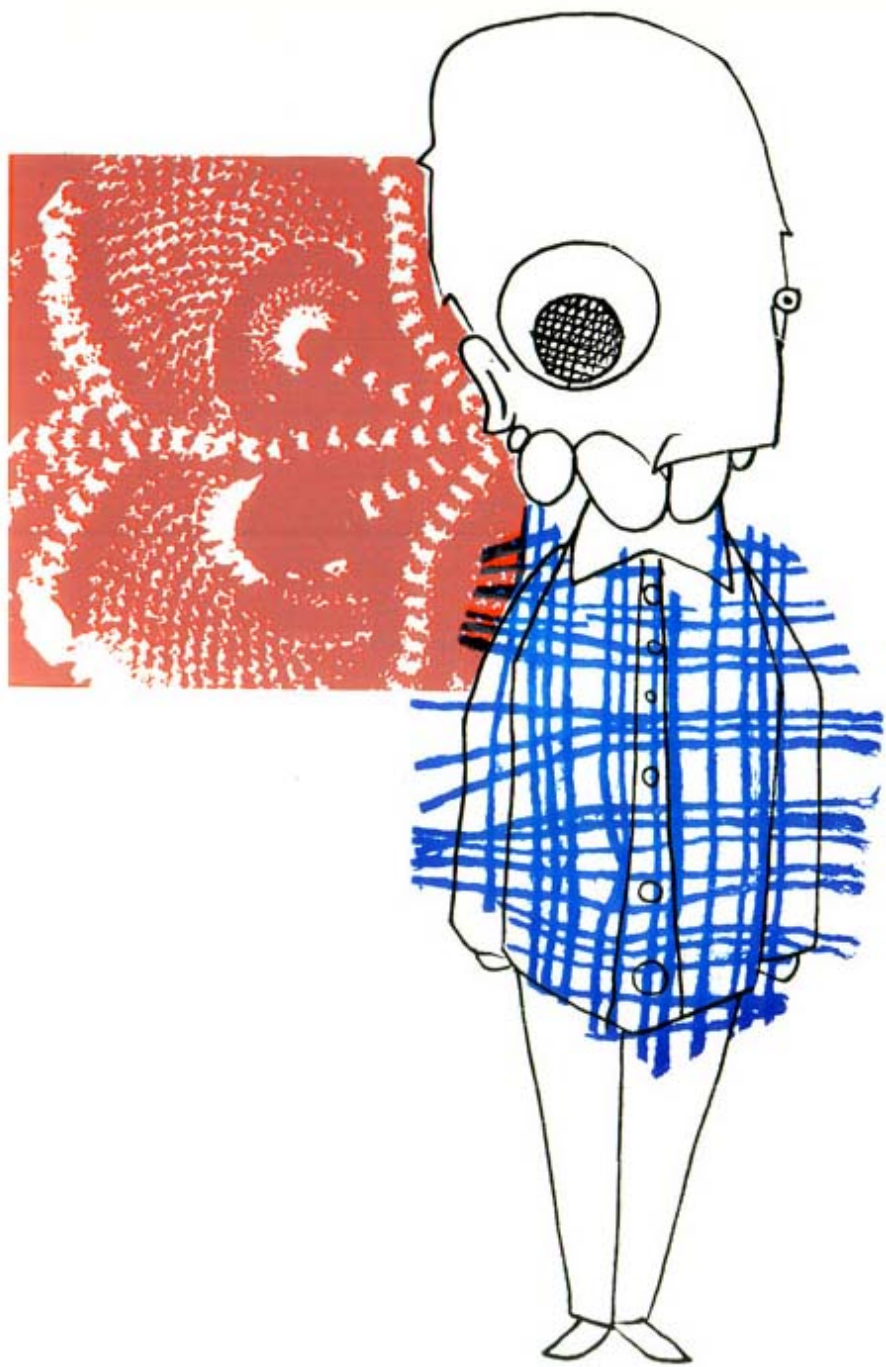
Your feet are so magnificent and so grand,  
That I love to touch them whenever I can.  
The way your toes wiggle,  
The way your feet jump when tickled.  
I love to rub them and cover them with oil,  
Feet fit for the royal.  
Oh how I loved your feet,  
Until they got up and walked away.

**Tart**

---

Miss Chockie Tom

I ignored my old poem,  
He hid it in the lyrics  
He stitches his past lovers  
On the lapel  
Of his worn burgundy suit  
Mine are written



On the inside  
Of my eyelids

He smokes now  
Shallow laughter again  
I never noticed the  
Crookedness of  
His smile or  
The ugliness of  
His left hand,  
His fingers they are  
Too long and  
Much too dark  
To be exotic

## Pleasures

Alessander

### I “Pleasures”

Why has the glimmer gone from your eyes?  
those tears have overflowed and drowned  
a certain glance, mischievous yet shy  
the most tender I have ever known.

Your looks are now dull daggers  
I no longer can filter your smile from your work  
dampens you—and arouses then *angers*  
me . . . when I lie awake turning, turning in the stark  
Solitude of unmolested thought  
the image of two women slowly forms . . .

One is dressed in flowing white within a park  
the Other, humping a brass pole in a g-string in the dark

One is gazing, lowly, at the promising blue skies  
the Other, rubbing her nipple on a fat slob’s throbbing lips  
One is basking in her daughter’s naive “whys?”

the Other—crawling on her knees collecting tips  
Oh why has the glimmer gone from your eyes?

### II “those men with cigars”

bellowing, after hours  
the noise has faded, the dim lights slowly surge back to life  
illuminating the illusion of the smutty night  
on the wobbly table, the sky-scrapers of stack green bills await  
compensation for each dancer  
they haggle and laugh—take a pudgy puff—haggle and finally  
hand out alms—  
patting the girl on her ass, sending her on her way  
the transaction is now official.  
for each dancer—a filthy feeling—followed by a quick trip  
to the restroom for some lines to numb more than their gums  
for each dancer—a lingering void when leaving—  
as if they’re somehow more  
naked and poor than when they first arrived.

### III “It’s OK”

it’s o.k. for a man to weep when no one is watching  
it’s o.k. for a man to dissolve into a quivering coward  
behind shut doors, only the gods are catching  
a glimpse of man in his most finite hour;  
it is o.k. to decay into perfect health  
it is o.k. for a hero to ponder villainous thoughts  
it is o.k. for a man to feel poor in wretched wealth  
it is o.k. to collapse on the floor and want to shout  
and yet remain silent—in the shadow  
of a fading figure . . . behind shut doors.

### IV “my muse, always, remember”

remember my kisses, always, remember  
that for one moment in this cold, callused world  
that for one moment, like an orange ember  
dimming in the night—we infused the world  
with a warmth, that only a few could share  
with a gesture and silence only a few could give  
priceless as a blue-diamond and as rare  
of no commercial value—can this be love:  
to blossom into ripeness and then wither  
on a memory?—my muse, always, remember

V  
“ . ”

if i cannot sweep you off your feet  
rescue you like some knight in shining armor  
then at the very least, give me a chance  
to pry you from your dreams—  
kicking and screaming into love.

## My Ten Dollar Bill

Patrick Curl

I should have taken  
my ten dollar bill  
from her bra in her black dress  
on her white breast  
Then I couldn't pretend  
I had some moral grandeur  
All I had was fear

she had braces  
I got braces  
to be like her  
And my teeth were bad

we ate lunch  
on the wood platform  
on the grass  
in the sun  
she preferred the rain  
I preferred the rain

we were at a party  
behind a house  
just outside  
the light  
I said I loved her  
she comforted me  
I said I didn't know who I was  
she believed me

I cried when she let him  
touch her there  
when she touched him there  
with the othergirls

I should have taken  
my ten dollar bill  
as I craved to  
as she told me to  
But I was just a boy

## “There is no”

Janet Ramirez

There is no  
Old flame  
In my past  
That I might  
Fan back  
To life  
If I must.



## The Occupational Penis

Anita Sniezko

When I was at the tender age of three my mother had the shock of walking into the bathroom to catch me standing on the toilet, lid up, panties slung around my ankles, small puddles everywhere, while I gleefully announced, “I’m peeing like Nandy!” Nandy would be my older brother Randy. In hindsight I knew that I was on to something. She cleaned up the mess and told me that I could not use the toilet the same way that my brother did because he was a boy and he had a penis, which is why it was possible for him to stand while I, being a girl, would always need to sit down. “Because he’s a boy” echoed throughout my childhood and teens whenever I questioned various endeavors where I was not allowed to participate. I never bought into that odd sense of logic and, therefore, unknown to my parents, did exactly the same things that my brother did, except for the “Nandy” thing because for that—I did indeed need a penis. After years of observation I discovered that guys not only got to have the most fun, they also had bestowed upon them some sort of effortless power. I have always felt that I should have just as much fun and, of course, power as the next guy, so I took great pleasure in succeeding in the building construction business, and all without a penis. Here is my story . . .

It started when I found myself employed in a construction company that repaired homes for insurance companies. The repairs became necessary when water lines broke in the walls or slab, errant washing machine hoses began spewing water throughout the house, grease fires started in the kitchen: anything that was an accident and caused damage that was covered by the homeowner policy. My job title was “estimator” and was, for the most part, held by men. I, however, with a little help from nepotism was hired for this position and not the front office where the other females were appropriately employed. The estimator position consisted of accessing the damages, taking pictures of damaged areas, writing a scope for the cost of repairs and once the home owner agreed for the work to proceed, complet-

ing work orders and sending them to the scheduler to begin the repair process. After a considerable amount of training I was ready to go on my own, but was limited to handling flooring, i.e., carpeting, ceramic, hardwood, vinyl, anything that involved replacement of a decorative nature, though a certain amount of structural repair was involved when floors had been on fire or under water. The homeowners were thrilled to see me because they were certain that their insurance company went to the added expense of sending out an interior decorator. Who better suited than a female who could measure, show samples, and hold their hand through the process? So, we had the homeowners happy, but when I would submit my work orders to the scheduling department there was quite a bit of grumbling because, you see, the subcontractors weren’t quite so fooled. Apparently I needed something more that would know how many sheets of plywood were needed to replace a damaged sub-floor or how many square yards of carpeting it would take to carpet a home, or basically anything involved in completing the repairs. The inside buzz was that I lacked a certain penis.

Two years later I moved on to a construction company that did insurance repair work on a much larger scale. Repairs were not only limited to the interiors of homes, but also involved concrete repairs, roof replacement, electrical, plumbing, framing of exterior walls, anything that could possibly need to be repaired or replaced. Not something your average decorator usually gets involved in. Although I quickly learned to estimate these large repairs, I still didn’t have the magic wand. When it came time to have the homeowner sign the contract to begin the repairs, the rule was that one of the male bosses be present because it was said that the homeowners would not have confidence in a female. Again—the proverbial penis.

At a much later time I obtained a contractor’s license of my own and started a construction company. Since I had all my training in doing work for the insurance industry, my company specialized in insurance repairs, as well. However, I found it difficult to be taken seriously without a penis. Little by little the company began to build a reputation for quality workmanship



and great customer service. The company was so prosperous that I hired more estimators to handle the load of business. I hired two females and taught them how to estimate the repairs of homes. When the front office made the initial call to set up for inspection, the homeowners, many times, became quite alarmed that it would be a female estimating the repairs. Other times they would wait until we showed up at the door and with no qualms at all would simply state, "What could a woman possibly know about construction!" Once our investigation had been completed, we would walk the job with them and explain whatever repairs were needed. As we handed them the pen to sign the contract so that repairs could begin, we would assure them that we had a heavy supply of penis carrying men who would actually do the repairs, and that would put them at ease.

The business began to grow and people started to take notice. The perception of the company changed from being this anomaly, to being a viable place of employment. I took a chance and brought one of my male subcontractors on board to be trained as an estimator. Of course this meant that the company now actually had a penis in its domain. He was very good at his specialty, the installation of carpeting and vinyl flooring, but knew virtually little else about construction. Like I said, he was in training. The dynamics at the office changed. I, as the owner of the company, no longer had to dodge salespeople because they were only too happy to push me aside as they made a beeline to the perceived penis with the buying power. Junk mail began arriving with his name on the envelope "to the attention of the owner." After a couple years of his struggling with the estimator position, we both came to the conclusion that he was best suited for his previous job. We remained great business associates and he was one of my better subcontractors. What I found amusing was that even though he didn't quite get it as an estimator, I would hear an occasional comment like, "When he was here things ran so much smoother . . ." I have only to guess that it was the penis that kept them fooled.

All this experience got me to thinking that the penis must be quite the wonder tool and, in the case of construction,

"size does matter." It must be large enough to hold the measuring tape, nail gun, framing joists, roofing tiles, and among other things, the large blue book of building codes. I am quite perplexed as to how information about construction flows to the brain effortlessly and can be called upon quickly and accurately through that marvel of a penis.

Given that the penis is so revered in the field of construction, I can only imagine what is going on out there with the other male dominated occupations. It boggles my mind when I think about the astronauts, race car drivers, and great chefs, to name a few. What do those penises contain? Apparently the astronauts have enough penises between them all so that it allows room for one female on an expedition. And actually what is it that has all those penises racing around the track at such high speeds? Females are known to do most of the cooking in the household but it appears the penis is needed more often than not when it comes to being a great chef. The highest paid actor still gets more money per picture than the highest paid female. You guessed it—the penis. In fact the penis is so coveted in the industry that we rarely get a glimpse of it while females are filmed unequivocally naked. I now know why the Donald Trumps of the world are known to "swing the big dicks," but let us not forget the granddaddy penis of them all, the President of the United States. Let's face it, no female can even bluff her way into that penis aura of greatness. I try to imagine it sitting in some glass dome with these two large hands lifting off the top. A voice bellying into the atmosphere, "We've got the penis," before ceremoniously attaching it to the chosen male.

Although this audacious phallicism may prove to be a challenge to women, it can be overcome. In fact there are a lot of women out there who know about the power of the penis and they manage to break through the glass ceiling with flirtation and coaxing of said organ. Owning and operating a construction company has taught me that even though I will never be able to "pee like Nandy," I and many women like myself will become astronauts, building contractors, chefs, and someday the President, simply because . . . we have the balls.

## Restraint

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Sarah LaVoie

Longing for the stars  
She is like an infant yearning to be held.  
Her dreams expand like the wings of a bird,  
But she cannot fly.  
She is a prisoner of the Earth  
Desperately trying to peel her raspberry-red toe-nailed-feet  
From the cemented landscape,  
As though she is peeling the rind off an orange and failing.  
She cannot budge.  
Trapped in her cage like a nightengale,  
She sings the lyrics they compose for her.

## Soup-Kitchen Poem #5

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Alessander

“If you get cut you better bandage the knife”  
If you get lonely, you’d better not call your wife  
Just sit in the darkness and stare at the stars  
Just listen to music and *feel* who you are  
  
If the wounds are deep, they’re not deep enough  
If you’re still strutting around like you’re tough  
Just stroll through the darkness and stare at the stars  
Just listen to music and *feel* who you are  
  
I remember sobbing and running, the hurt, the *hurt*  
*Thumping* and *throbbing* right through my shirt  
But then a voice seeped in “Now *this* is life . . .  
If you get cut you better bandage the knife”

## Blue Eyes and Epilepsy

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Marina Duff

His name was Jason “hospital bracelets and pee in cups” Duff.  
While he got shitty doctor after shitty doctor,  
  
I would eat grilled cheese sandwiches  
and make entire mansions out of couch cushions.  
  
And to think,  
all he ever wanted was to ride the bus without a helmet  
and to be able to tie his unruly-red velcro shoes.

## “The poet”

---

Janet Ramirez

The poet  
Like the whore  
Is always forced  
To ask for more.

## With A Mustache Like That, Who Needs Enemies?

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Arielle Ceci

I’d never heard a grown man whine like that.  
To top it off, he had an offensive mustache,  
a circusy one.  
Could’ve been wax  
or maybe glass  
in which case  
I should have ripped it off him

thrown it on the floor  
crushed it with my feet  
and pissed on the smithereens.

## 2002 LITERARY CONTEST AWARD WINNER

### Too Red

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Lenise Andrade

The red is too red, Toni thought, running a hand through her short black hair. She knew Ed would tell her this later. He always loved her paintings, but anytime she showed him something too much, too bold, too angry, he would comment on it. He wouldn't tell her to change it, or that it was bad, necessarily. But he would say it was too red. Toni didn't care. Sometimes life was too red.

The painting was a hotel room scene. A corner of the bed on the left, a red comforter mostly on the floor, and two hands, holding on tight to each other, hanging over the edge of the bed. The comforter was possibly too red. But that was that weekend. And maybe memory had made it stronger instead of weaker.

"Smile, okay? A real smile. Not one of those tight grins you usually give me." Toni's boyfriend Evan took the snapshot, her sitting on a short brick wall near the pier, the sailboats at the Seaport Village in the background. Toni was just barely eighteen, her dark brown eyes bright with anticipation in the photo. Her first weekend away with her first love. It was her first grown-up trip, complete with dinners charged on her first credit card, *Sea World* souvenirs and a hotel room they'd share all weekend. Here, they were adults, acting as if on a resort vacation. Back home in Los Angeles, they were college students with bookstore jobs who still lived with their parents. But Toni's teenage bedroom often sat empty. They were always somewhere together.

After the photo, Evan had taken her hand and brought her back to the little table outside the cafe where they drank lattes and shared a raspberry scone. The sea breeze made Toni's long wavy brown hair fly onto her face. Evan kept telling her how pretty she looked as the sun set and he held her hand under the table. With Evan, Toni felt safe and comfortable, which was unlike her. When they were together, she felt at home. She'd bury her face into his shoulder like a favorite pillow and she'd breathe in and out, no matter where they were and that always made her feel better.

"I thought I'd buy us some wine and we'd take it back to the hotel room," Evan said, rubbing her hand under the table. "Maybe get us some cheese and crackers and see what's on the cable in the room?" Evan flashed her his wide smile and crinkled his green eyes at her.

"Sure. Yeah. That would be really nice."

"Maybe I'll get a magazine at the liquor store, too," Evan said, again smiling and crinkling those eyes.

"What? Oh, uh, sure, okay." Toni had continued feeling warm, as long as Evan kept rubbing her hand.

"It's too red," Ed said, keeping his chin on Toni's right shoulder as he peered over her to look at the painting.

"I know, but it's supposed to be." Toni kept her hands at her sides as she straddled her chair, paintbrush still in her left hand.

"And it's a little scary. Their hands are holding each other, but I can't tell if they're holding onto each other, or if he's holding her down." Ed began to rub at her neckline.

"I know. I know." Toni held her paintbrush tight.

Toni lay under the hotel sheets, still a little awed by how wonderful her brown skin felt against the crisp white sheets. Evan was in the shower, his post-sex ritual of cleaning and scrubbing and whistling. He had bought a *Playboy*, his latest obsession. He would flip through the layouts, asking Toni which girl she found most attractive. Toni had no interest in any of them,

only had eyes for Evan, but eventually she'd relent and pick a girl she found least threatening, usually a brunette with breasts around her size. Evan would keep the magazine on the bed while he began to make love to her, touching her and telling her it was the model's hands and lips doing those things to her. Evan narrated his lesbian role until the actual act of insertion began and then it was so much thrusting and groaning, Toni never really had much time to react. Afterwards, he was so tender and sweet and she still usually managed to come, so she never thought to complain. Maybe other couples did this too. She didn't know. Besides, this was what made Evan happy. End of story.

"Hey, babe, do I seem okay?" Evan strode quickly out of the bathroom and sat naked and wet on the edge of the bed. He had seemed shaken, Toni later remembered, and his eyes had looked larger than usual.

"Babe, what's wrong? You look shook up." Toni sat up and ran a hand over his slippery back.

"My eyes. Do they seem large to you?" Evan brought his face close to hers, his green staring straight into her brown.

"No, they seem fine." Toni's heart began to speed up. She rubbed his back, which was what she always did when he got like this. She was starting to get used to his attacks. That's what he called them.

"I was looking at them in the mirror and the pupils, they just started to get larger and larger."

"Well, if you stare at them long enough, I think they do that."

"I know, you're right. But look at my hands. Don't they seem larger?" He held up his hands, turning them back and forth in front of her face.

"Larger than when?"

"Larger than a few hours ago! Maybe it was the calamari we ate at the Seaport."

"But you're not allergic to seafood," Toni reasoned.

"Maybe I am now. Maybe it's just crustaceans."

"I thought oysters were crustaceans."

"Jesus, Toni, you're not listening to me! I'm serious, my

hands are fucking bigger and you're not taking me seriously."

"Okay, okay, calm down." Toni rubbed Evan's back and let out a small "sssh." "Let's be logical. If you were allergic, your whole body would be swollen and I don't think your hands look that big anyway."

"All right, you're right, you're right. Thank you." Evan put his arms around Toni, held her tight against his still damp chest, his breathing sharp and hard, his heart thumping through the red comforter into her chest.

Toni looked at Ed's quiet brow, listened to the slight snore as he exhaled and adjusted his blonde head on her pillow as he slept. Sometimes he would reach for her waist in his sleep, a small subconscious gesture, that was so sweet and kind, the sort of thing he would do even if he was awake, that Toni could only shake her head. How had she found him? He was younger than she, three years younger, as she had been to Evan. Sometimes it seemed like a decade was between them. Toni felt old. At least fifty, though she was only twenty-five.

Toni slid quietly from the bed, out from under Ed's arms and right leg and walked across her small studio toward the dining area, where her easel and canvases were kept. She sat on her chair, aware wet paint now marked her bare thigh, but didn't care. It *was* too red, she thought. Maybe if she muted the walls, made them more beige or tan, then the red comforter wouldn't seem so red. But that's how it had been. That's what she remembered now. The red comforter and the bare white walls. Everything bare between them.

Evan woke up with a start. He sat straight up with a gasp so loud it woke Toni up.

"Jesus, Toni, how could you let me fall asleep?" Evan screamed at her, almost on top of her. He grabbed her wrist and flipped her around to face him. "Toni, you're not real. This isn't real."

"What? What're you talking about? You're fine now. Everything's okay." Toni tried to wake up quickly.

Miss Chockie Tom

"No, it's not and don't fucking lie to me. It's not okay and my hands are swollen and you're lying to me. You've been lying to me all night. Why are you lying to me?" Evan's eyes darted around the room as he reached for Toni's hands.

"Okay, Evan, it's okay. You're all right. Your hands are fine, we're fine." Toni held on tight to Evan's hand and looked him straight in his eyes.

"Look at my hands. They're not real. They don't even feel like they're attached to my body. How is this my hand?"

"Evan, talk to me. What's wrong?" Toni whispered. She rubbed his chest, which was sweaty and pounding. She wondered if she should call the paramedics. Would they make him do the urine test again? The hypochondria was one thing, but she wasn't very good at this part.

"I'm not here. You're not here. We're not real." Tears were spilling down his cheeks,

"I'm here, Evan. I'm here. We're both real. I swear to God." Toni would do anything to make him calm down.

"Okay, okay." Evan breathed in and out, long exhales and inhales lasting several seconds. "Promise me, Toni. Promise me you'll never leave me." He began covering her cheeks, her eyes, her forehead with kisses. She held on tight to his hands as his kisses became more urgent and the comforter fell to the floor.

"I'll never leave, I promise." And Toni had meant it.

"It's interesting, Antonia, it really is. It just makes me a little uncomfortable. I mean, who'd want to put this painting in their house?" Theresa, Toni's art dealer, touched the base of the dark brown frame Toni had placed her painting in. Toni didn't think this painting would sell, almost didn't want it to, but she had brought it anyway.

"Okay, it's different. It's not flowers or saints like my usual stuff, but I just thought, maybe it was more real."

"Real, yes, but is it you? Are you being real?"

"Yes, it's me. It's really me. And I know, it's too red."

"Maybe. Maybe a little too red."

I.

I am standing in an urban  
sardine can, creaking along  
the broken concrete, weighed  
down with one too many bags,  
composing tiny notes, plump  
with self pity and sparks of  
flickering adoration

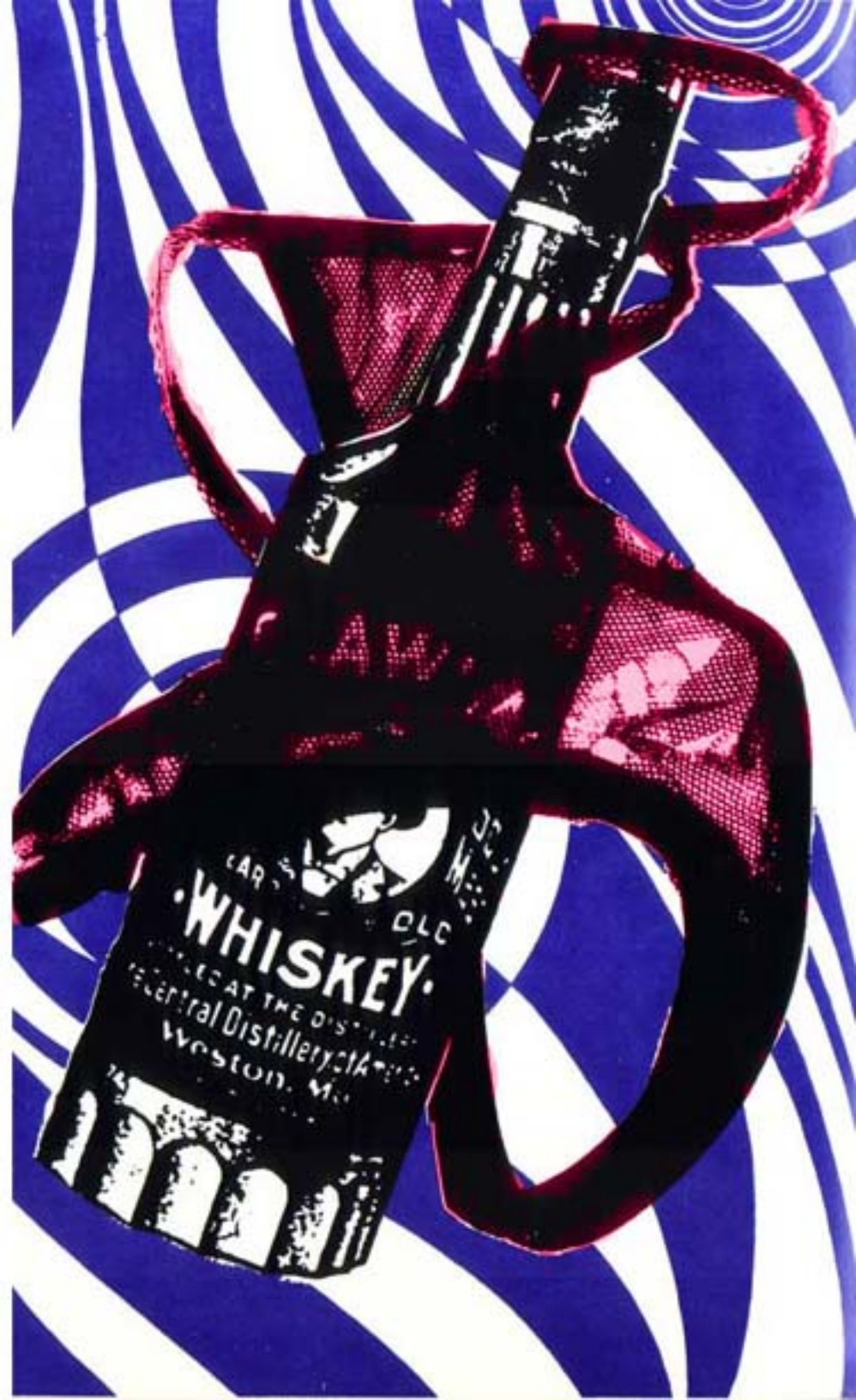
II.

fragrant cigarette butts  
beer cans swell over the sink  
the cat tampers with panties  
dangling from the bed post  
scampers away, a flash  
of pink lace dances  
out the window

III.

9:30, you haven't called  
drinking out of the carton  
clothing kicked in to the closet  
showered, come over quick  
today was hectic, and I  
am almost ready to  
solicit myself







## White House

---

Ryan Moore

Souls pounding walls  
waking me up at night.  
Wanting to play and be alive again.  
I invite them in.  
Their names are valuable.  
Sunlight fends off the darkness of morning.  
The dust settles in the light.  
Memories floating, writhing and timeless.  
Another falls to the floor.

My back on the ground, staring at the wood.  
The plaster, the life that makes the ceiling.  
The crack that bleeds in light,  
never patched, left to widen.  
Creaking shoes.  
Walls of soft America.

Bricks of red and mortar.  
Lazy legs dipped in the pool.  
Blue skies past the palm trees  
and phone lines.  
G.I. Joe sessions in the dirt.  
Diving off that roof,  
that holds the floor above.  
Fenced in, protected,  
oblivious in my backyard.

Rug burns and candy land.  
Rubber rolling down the kitchen floor.  
Dog scratches on the door.  
Concrete loving the rug,  
that warms it.  
The moon lighting my face.  
Sleeping in my blanket tent,  
covering the couch and my mind.

Dog licks and mighty conversations.  
Spread through this tiny atmosphere.  
I know the sound the door makes.  
I have found the secrets of this tiny sanctuary.  
I wish I could share it with you.  
This house, that I have known.

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## "Yesterday he still looked into my eyes"

Taran Rose O'neill

*Yesterday he still looked into my eyes*  
But today, he pauses slightly as we speak  
And grins, then gazes off to recompose  
Something fractured, something, I can tell—goodbyes  
Have taken their toll, and I can tell today  
The shell shock has set in—a sunflower  
Drenched, or perhaps that was never given  
I know him—every shift to every glance  
And somehow he will always be forgiven  
Though he hurts and I hurt, though we both try  
To shrug it off, changing the channels, snacking  
Exchanging small talk about the daily nothing  
Rearranging ourselves on the couch, pouncing the pillows  
Somehow there is something in all this, lacking  
In between the commercials and the shows  
Lurches a hurt that is hard to believe really exists  
In such a framed moment, if space is infinite  
In extent, we must now be experiencing  
The infinite divisibility of time  
Bulging beneath  
And beyond the beat of heart, the flicker of the remote  
Somehow the pulse drags down the breath  
In me, though we both chat and laugh and eventually rise  
After yet another pause, and go to his room  
Somehow, he will always be forgiven  
*Yesterday he still looked into my eyes.*

## Comfort

Tiffany Grejler

The scattered rain  
Falls against  
The outside  
Away from  
Comfort

I can hide  
Away  
Pretending not  
To see my  
Sorrow

Pulling me violently  
From my  
Room  
And I am  
Here

With you in  
Memory as always  
While you dream  
Of dancing  
This vast earth

You will find  
All you wish  
Because you  
No longer  
Look  
For me

## To *La Guadalupe*

Julia Casillas

In my old days of bartering with you  
You'd take away my cramps  
If I promised to do the dishes

You were the only one of them I knew  
The only one I had access to  
The only brown face  
In the white pantheon of Catholic gods and saints  
You were the only one who didn't look like  
You were going to hemorrhage to death at any second

But more and more  
I found myself feeling sorry for you  
Hands neatly clasped with a  
Humble gaze that almost  
Bordered on shame

Curiosity set in and one day  
I lifted up your skirt  
To see if you had legs  
Brown and strong like mine  
Wanting to make sure  
You weren't a hoax  
A stuffed doll waiting to topple over

What I found were chains  
Draped down around your ankles

This time it was who struck the deal  
"Let me go and I'll set you free"

You wanted to dance and run  
Far away somewhere

Where they'd know your name and  
Stop calling you "virgencita"

Taking those age-old rusty chains off you,  
I wept and wept

I asked you why  
You thought you could get away now  
After five hundred years

You said that they were all at a big ceremony  
Canonizing Juan Diego

I didn't know whether to laugh  
Or cry some more

### It Wouldn't Have Bothered Her

Marina Duff

"Imagine a garden hose on full blast and it's splashing  
uncontrollably-only it's a ruptured artery in your wife's head."  
The neuro-surgeon's eyes fell to his clipboard.

Dad walked over and described how her left eye popped out  
of its socket,

"too much pressure," he said.

Then he told me every detail of Senior Prom in '76  
and how she made her dress the night before.

He also told me about the time he and mom got drunk  
in the back of his Ford  
and she peed in her left shoe on accident.

The doctor said she was dead before she hit the floor  
of the fabric store.

He doesn't know that now we're faced with the choice  
between college or a casket.

## 2002 LITERARY CONTEST AWARD WINNER

### Harsh Reflections

Juliet Myrtetus

Night falls quickly in the desert. Darkness chases twilight's last radiant streaks over the western horizon and stars emerge to burn coldly without casting light. This rapid transition startles me from my preoccupation. My family and I are on a Christmas pilgrimage from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, and it has been a hectic trip. Procrastination and traffic have joined forces to put us six hours behind schedule, but we are finally making good time. The car is packed with presents and treats and warm sweaters. It is cozy in here despite the cold outside. We are all quiet for the first time since we left. A moment ago, I was listening to the siren song of the hotel whirlpool and thinking about the family and the friends we will see tomorrow. But suddenly, something else has demanded my attention.

From the other side of the glass, the darkened desert seems to regard me as I regard it. This is not the irrigated, marine-layer covered Mediterranean garden I have just left behind. This is the real desert, high on the Mojave Plateau. We are near Death Valley, which was not named in a fit of irony. My stomach tightens and my hand reaches to lock the door. As the lock clicks, I wonder whether I am locking myself in or the desert out. The sky is a cold black, faintly luminous, filled with stars that fail to glitter. The hill that rises against it is a different, somehow blacker black. Dead black. Although I can't see them, I know that the parched earth is crawling with spiny, heartless things that are less afraid of me than I am of them. I have never liked the desert, but now I must admit my feelings transcend mere dislike. I must admit fear.

I prefer to travel over the desert rather than through it. From the air, I gaze with calm detachment at the naked, jagged features that are not softened or disguised by vegetation. "Looks dry down there," I think as I sip something cool. I pretend that

30,000 feet is a very long way indeed, and soon the sere terrain is gone and forgotten. Traveling east, I admire the rivers and rich fields of the Great Plains. Their green fertility soothes the arid vision from my mind. Traveling west, the end of the desert means I am almost home, where brilliantly engineered aqueducts protect me from the mild desert of the Los Angeles basin. Neither Los Angeles nor Las Vegas has any water of its own. L.A. pilfers its from the Owens Valley, a once-fertile farmland in the Sierra Nevadas. Vegas's comes from a formerly dry valley that's now Lake Mead. The clever devices that allow us to hurtle through thin air and live in environs for which we are not fit also engender appalling presumption. Dazzled by our aqueducts, dams, and airplanes, we draw thick black lines between ideas like *human* and *animal*, *civilization* and *nature*. But now, as I speed along this thick black road ensconced in a steel carapace designed to protect my fragile body from the folly of traveling at so breakneck a pace, all the lines begin to blur. Tiny dunes encroach upon this strip of human territory, and I see that I am just another animal, and one ill suited to the environment in which I find myself. Alone here with nothing but what God gave me, I might not last the night. But I am not alone: taillights make a much better trail than breadcrumbs. On one hand, I am dismayed by this parade of hubris. On the other hand, I am profoundly, existentially grateful to be among my kind.

I watch the passing landscape and think of it as a savage place. But it dawns on me that *savage* is not the right word. That implies ruthlessness, even malice. The desert is not malicious. It is something worse than that. It is apathetic. Malice can be struggled against, but how can one combat indifference to one's existence? The desert does not wish to destroy us, but it offers no succor. The creatures that subsist there are hard, twisted things, warped by generation after generation of wringing life from the sand, drop by miserable drop. The plants have evolved weapons from innocent leaves, and every creeping thing is armed with venom. And the desert does not care. We know that if we were out there, soft, damp things that we are, we would die quickly and not well, fighting nothing, signifying nothing while the

desert watched with rock-hard eyes, dry as dust. It is utterly indifferent to us and to our silly delusions of dominion. We are beneath its notice. And so we hate it.

Or maybe it's just me. The great psychologist Carl Jung cautions that when one has a visceral, negative reaction to something, one is reacting to something that one despises within oneself. So now I must turn my gaze inward. The desert is not apathetic, malicious, or anything else. It's just an ecosystem. Plants and animals have evolved to live here just as they have everywhere else. So what am I keeping from myself that is so perfectly reflected in this dry surface? The answer, of course, is as simple as it is unsettling. I play the part of a kind, generous, nurturing person. I give lavish gifts, lend large sums without a second thought, and agonize over the problems of my friends. But the truth is that there is a side of me that doesn't give a good god-damn about anyone. A side where scattered seeds of friendship and warmth will lie desiccated. I know in my heart that gifts and loans are substitutes for sympathy and tenderness. As for problems, I don't really agonize so much as ponder. I look at friends' tribulations as puzzles to solve or as exercises in applied cause-and-effect. In these hidden regions of my psyche, anything that needs charity will shrivel, wither, and die and I will watch it die and I will not care. The desert is a mirror, and it shows me everything I wish I were not, but am.

But now, suddenly, these sundry reflections are outshone by sparkling lights. My companions rouse themselves from their respective dreams and reveries as we descend into the valley of the city that Bugsy built. Self-analysis is supplanted by talk of dinner. I know that as soon as I am surrounded by bright neon and chirping slot machines, my meditation on my emotional shortcomings will fade. After all, the city is designed to induce temporary amnesia. Tomorrow I will join family and friends to celebrate a holiday defined by generosity, charity, mercy, and kindness. I will show my family warmth and affection, and those things will be real. But the desert inside me is also real. Maybe someday I will find some good in it, and wring some character from this flaw. Maybe someday I will grow to be the person I





wish to be. But right now, that someday seems as distant as the stars on a cold desert night.

## Being a Veggie in a Meaty World

Tracy Umana

I am a vegetarian. My vegan straightedge hardcore punk rock libertarian anarchist friend Matt thinks a vegan who eats honey is a vegetarian and being called a vegetarian is an insult. See, vegetarians don't eat meat but vegans don't eat eggs or dairy, gelatin, mono and diglycerides, and numerous other things. The *real* vegans don't even eat honey because they hurt the poor bees. So anyway, Matt thinks I am a fence sitter for the oncoming vegan revolution since I am but a mere vegetarian. The vegan revolution is when all the vegans take over the world and eating meat is officially banned. I ask Matt when this revolution will take place and he always says, "Tomorrow."

So, yeah, I might be a total poseur for eating dairy but it's really hard to give up milk chocolate. Dark chocolate doesn't even taste like chocolate. It tastes like coffee! I hate coffee.

Starbucks is Satan disguised as an overpriced cafe latte.

It's "counter-revolutionary."

I don't eat fast food either.

Fast food is evil.

McDonalds is the 5th Reich disguised as a one dollar value meal.

I hate when I tell people that I am a vegetarian and they ask me if I eat fish. Last time I checked, fish wasn't a vegetable. People also ask if I mind when people eat meat in front of me. I tell them it's OK if they want to increase their chances of having high blood pressure, heart attacks, colon cancer, ecoli, salmonella, food poisoning, tapeworms, and diabetes. They have every right to contribute to the torture and slaughter of billions of billions of poor animals, but since I think murder is wrong and contributing to totalitarianism and the mass destruction of our earth

isn't good, I choose not to contribute to it but you do what you want. And then I wonder why vegans and vegetarians get a bad reputation for being overly preachy and cynical . . . .

It's hard being a veggie in a meaty world. Almost everything out there is made from an animal product or caused an animal to be harmed in some way. Did you know the evil Nazi empire known as McDonalds puts meat flavoring in their fries to make them taste better? Why not add some animal fat to the milk shakes . . . wait, they do that too. I'm sure the salad could use some pig's blood. I don't think the soda has horse hooves yet. Seriously is that shit even necessary? Well, they think it is?

Have you read *Fast Food Nation*? It's about how evil the fast food industry is. I cry every time I pass by a Burger King now. Did you know there may be more fecal matter in your hamburger than in your toilet? Eat up, kids!

The worst argument I have heard for eating meat is that if we don't eat animals, they'll end up taking over the world and eating us. What the hell kind of screwed up logic is that? Yeah, if we don't eat those evil carnivorous cows and chickens, they'll end up eating us. Planet of the Poultry is just around the corner, just you wait!

My friend Matt, whom I mentioned earlier, tried to become a fruitarian. A fruitarian is someone who only eats food that naturally falls to the ground and doesn't kill the plant in order to be harvested. That's pretty hardcore right there. It reminds me of that one episode of *The Simpsons* when Lisa falls in love with that hardcore environmentalist and he says, "I'm a level five vegan. I don't eat anything that casts a shadow." I guess some people can get a little carried away. They can get so hardcore that they end up only drinking water and starving to death. Starving to death isn't really a good thing. You don't need to starve to death, but being cruelty-free as possible is a good thing to strive for if you care about life and the environment. Even if you only care about yourself, just knowing the kind of crap that's in meat (literally) is enough to make most people think twice when they bite into that juicy steak.

I'm sure meat eaters think being a vegetarian is getting



too carried away. I bet some of the meat eaters right now are rolling their eyes as they read this and think I am being too preachy or cynical and why don't I just shut up and eat a burger already? Believe me, I've heard it all. I bet they'd also try and counter with, "What about those poor plants? You're killing innocent vegetables!" and think themselves really clever for coming up with that. You know you thought about saying that yourself. Well, yes, vegetables have feelings too but more plants are killed feeding livestock than feeding people. So not eating meat is saving more plants from being killed and the tons of food wasted on animal farming can be enough to feed everyone on the planet, so it all works out, see?

So, yes, being a veggie in a meaty world can really be a pain in the ass sometimes, but when all the meat eaters die of colon cancer, I'm sure it will be much easier.

## Just Take It

Lisa Kelly

Jesus wants you to have that Cadillac, son. He really does—you see, He's just not a Ford or a BMW kind of Man. The Ultimate Driving Machine, according to Jesus, is that baby blue Caddie. Go ahead—climb into it. Drive that car straight to Graceland and pray to our Lord Jesus Christ at the grave of his devoted gospel-singin' servant, then make somethin' of yourself there. No one, and I mean no one, son, can play the fiddle quite the way you can. At the risk of soundin' prissy, I'd say there's somethin' quite angelic about ya. Kind of like Elvis before he went and got all buttered up on too much fried chicken.

Jesus forgave Elvis, and He'll forgive you, too. He knows you should've *bought* that car, the one that will bring you to the Holy Graceful Land, but He also knows that Mort, the lawful owner of that wondrous vehicle, has not lifted a finger to praise that car by waxing it in five long years, whereas you, my boy, will be praying to the Lord Jesus Christ our Faith and Savior while

you lay the wax down upon it with your young and nimble fingers.

Jesus wants you to have that humming, purring, sky-colored driving machine so you can Praise God's Glory while driving across the Almighty United States of America. Here's just the right screwdriver for the ignition—God Himself placed it in my hand last night after we'd shared some Jim Beam and a couple of your Aunt Macy's almond cakes.

Take a cake or two, boy, and these Jesus bumper stickers. (Don't you just love the way those thorns make Him bleed? Now, that's devotion.) Then drive like the wind, boy—eat those sweet-tastin' cakes and praise God's Glory all the way to Graceland. You're a Man now—here's your chance. Don't dishonor God by screwin' it up. (You know your father only made it as far as Tulsa.)

Mort won't miss his light blue motion-mobile—he told me only yesterday that that particular car was goin' to ascend directly to Heaven so the Virgin Mary (who as you know, loves the color baby blue) could drive around in it up there. Now you know She won't need the car for at least a few months 'cause Mort's cherry-red Caddie ascended up there only yesterday (with your cousin Louella's assistance). Put a few more miles on the baby blue, boy—the Sacred Virgin Mother of God won't mind.

Your daddy's in jail, boy, and I'm too old to leave this here homestead. So it's up to you. Get outa here and live your goddamn "praise God, Jesus, Joseph, Mary and Elvis" dream.

## A Fleeting Thought . . . (for A—)

Taran Rose O'Neill

Dinner's at 8, show at 10  
Rushing, waiting . . . perfection  
The look in your sleepy eyes, and taste  
Of your chapped lips  
Tells me I am the only one

Tonight.  
As I sit and wait, surveying  
Your musky room, the scribbled  
Pieces of paper, the scattered  
Calendars, pictures and envelopes  
Tell me I am your default.  
She's away  
She wasn't home  
Chance has won you the consolation prize  
I am in a pageant of phantoms  
Those little remarks and straying eyes  
Tell me you had other plans  
Tonight,

A fleeting thought . . .

## Nite Club

Miss Chockie Tom

Driving me home,  
you blushing  
in your tinderbox on wheels,  
me drunken  
Rodney was mumbling,  
annoyed  
I reached over to  
turn the dial  
My earring  
fell in your lap  
I thought  
I saw you smile  
when I bent  
to retrieve it

## Like Approaching the Guillotine

Marina Duff

I will never forget Mom's embarrassing car.  
That light blue Oldsmobile was nowhere near  
the color of the sky.  
Every morning mom's fat hand rammed me through  
the passenger door and I was trapped  
until we reached Openeck Elementary.

On the ride over I would stare at the ceiling,  
intrigued by the broken interior light.  
Its translucent case displayed the silhouette  
of a family of dead flies  
and kept the ceiling fabric from drooping down to our thighs.  
But when mom rolled down her window  
the breeze would make the dark blue material flow  
like the kind of waves  
that could rip off your bathing suit bottom in one crash.

The day the sides finally loosened  
blue dust flew all over the interior.  
As I picked the ceiling fabric off of my school sweater,  
the car backfired again.  
Mom ignored it as she snapped  
"It's yours when you get your license. Then you can drive  
yourself to school."  
But I would rather walk to school naked  
than drive this crappy car.

The neighbors call us "The Dirt Poor Duffs"  
and they complain about our house  
ruining the motif of the block.  
But I could never tell Mom any of this  
because the seat belt would slice my neck at every stop sign.

## James Brown

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Arielle Ceci

So I was saying one night—  
and tell me if you agree—  
James Brown's hair  
ought to be made an official shape,  
like the trapezoid  
or the star  
See, I don't know if there is a department of  
government  
or anything  
in charge of shapes,  
but it really should be done—  
The Godfather's hair is howling  
for shapehood.

## Traffic Jam

---

James Noon

Hurry, hurry? I just don't want to stop.  
Signs of the apocalypse, now.  
The worst-case scenario is a taxing return.  
I steer clear of mobile homes,  
Blu-Blockers, and mobile phones.  
It's all around me: Head of the class  
clown, bumper sticker pride; No uvas.  
I *do* brake for animals, and honor  
students. D. A. R. E. I Believe Jesus  
is God? I'm not convinced that *she* is  
selfless. I'm not convinced that *she* is safe. No.  
*She* believes that *she* is blessed  
and going to heaven, and *she* is—  
sadly, sooner rather than later?

Like a twister applying lipstick, her  
lane change lifts eighteen-wheels  
from the asphalt. Disfigured glass and steel  
stop savagely on a dime in the diamond lane.  
Mirrors are a window to  
the world outside the bubble.  
No longer for making up,  
they reflect the faces of the dead.

Unwilling to pay attention  
shoppers light-up for the Cig Alert.  
While we wrestle with ourselves  
we watch as workers wash  
the weeping widower's wife  
who wiped out and off the westbound  
expressway, expressly  
because *she* believed that *He* could  
walk on water, therefore *she*  
could weave her way to and fro  
to the market and back  
without ever seeing the signs.

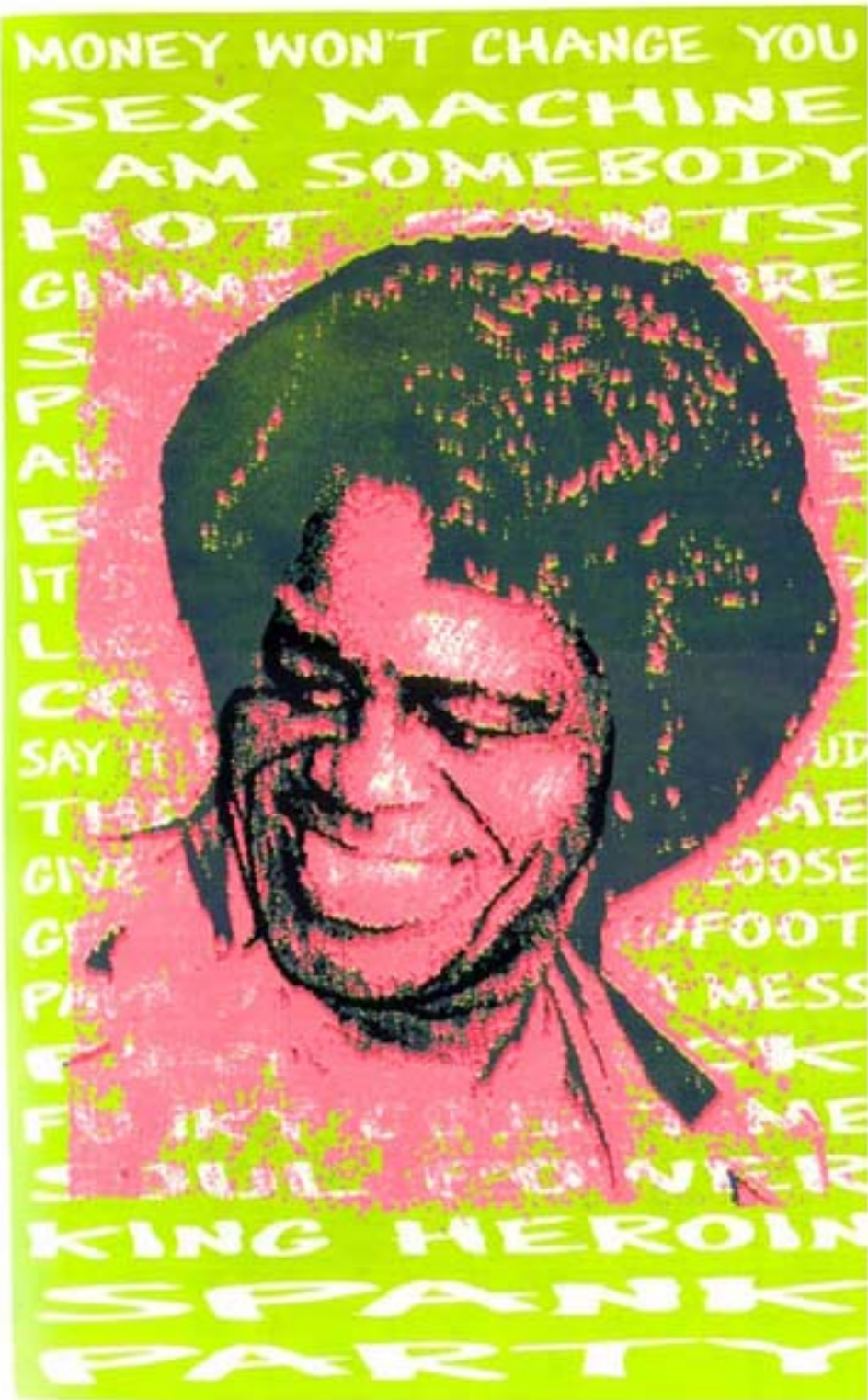
## Half Ocelot

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Arielle Ceci

When I lost all my charm and wit  
and food didn't taste good anymore  
I applied to become part ocelot  
I wrote the Int'l Bureau of Big Rowdy Cats  
and heard from them within a week  
I got back a glossy brochure  
and a watermarked membership card  
to carry in my wallet.  
Things are much better now:  
my appetite is healthy  
and I've become very good with anagrams and puns.





## Running

James Noon

The Presidential Candidate  
put on his running shoes,  
and tip-toed 'round the issues so  
he could not help but lose.

2002 LITERARY CONTEST AWARD WINNER

## Looking for Louis's Wonderful World

Dino Parenti

1

"Yeah, I remember that jaunt," I said.

Pop flipped through a musty collection of records with a methodical hand marred by liver spots. I watched casually, less than overwhelmed by the content. It was all jazz—not an *Abbey Road* or *Electric Ladyland* in the bunch.

"Really?" he mumbled under his breath.

His brother had given him the vinyl as a birthday gift. He did it before he left for Mexico several years ago, probably cause he couldn't make dollar-one selling them on the street. Uncle Russ dealt mostly with antiques, and the market was becoming saturated. It suited pop just fine. The albums were his pride and joy, and for the moment he truly looked as close to happy as he ever could, shrouded in dust-motes dancing in the rays of sunlight cut by window slats, a Benny Goodman clarinet saturating the den like country honey.

I shot my old man a scowl, then gulped down a cold shot of Old-Milwaukee. He didn't see it and I didn't care. What I despised was the ho-hum tone in his voice; the oblivious manner in which he dispensed condescension—as if the idea of intelligent discourse coming from the fruit of his own loins was laughable,

even at the tender age of twenty-eight.

"What are you looking for now?" I prompted. I looked out the window at the twin boys next door wrestling on the lawn. They were aggressive—wild as jackals scuffling over a carcass. They looked just like I did at five or six. One of them had a bloody nose going real good.

A characteristic pause. "Umm . . . I can't seem to find Mr. Louis Armstrong at the moment . . ."

"You know I hate to nag but, uh . . ."

". . . then don't . . ."

". . . but it's like mom said I don't know how many times: put those things in order cause you're not getting any younger."

He yawned like I didn't exist. "It's around here someplace . . ."

"You could be listening to that cheeky bastard by now. 'A' comes pretty early in the alphabet case you'd forgotten."

". . . Uh-huh . . ." he muttered, I think to Duke Ellington. Whatever.

This time I let things hang in the air like a silent fart for all the good it did. "So yeah, sure, pop, I remember the trip," I finally said. "We left the day after Hinkley tried to take out the Gipper in the middle of all his bulls, whenever the hell that was."

Pop nodded to himself, finger-walking through his big-band EP's. It infuriated me, but I managed to find some comfort in his indifference this go-around. Perhaps we were thinking the same thoughts right then. Having a *moment*. I couldn't have asked for anything more I guess.

2

It had been our first trip up the California desert—my first time out of greater L.A.—and I was ten. The water-skiing trip to Red-Beard's ranch in Fresno had been eighty-sixed in favor of visiting Uncle Russ in Tehachapi. Red-Beard was actually Hank Mooreland, a former neighbor in Montrose and shell-shocked Korean war vet who sported a hearty, Walt Whitman-like plumage of red hair on his chin.

He and pop had this weird relationship. At the time we lived in an apartment building and the gossip trade-winds float-

ing about expressed the unilateral view that he and Hank were totally fag for one another. What with virtually the entire make-up of the building hailing from Thailand and the like, it obviously stood to reason that if two men spent inordinate amounts of time together *without* a thirteen-year-old-girl shoe-horned between them, then surely they had to be butt pirates.

Of course I thought that was bullshit. This was *pop* after all, and as far as I knew he never even took a thermometer up his ass let alone did any of the things I heard some of the grown-ups say. But I couldn't deny the strangeness of their bond: how they would never display their affection with their wives around—how he would refuse to talk about their day together whenever my mom would ask about it. All anyone knew for sure was that they'd lock themselves in Hank's VW van with a twelve-pack for hours at a time and listen to *The Wall* or *Quadrophenia* until the well ran dry.

Then the day came that Hank got shit-canned from JPL for crunching numbers while under the influence. Three days later after a major binge that cost him a wife and a night in the drunk tank he left L.A. for good. Less than a month after he wrote to say he'd discovered paradise by a man-made lake stocked to the rim with trout, this in a part of the state where owning an outboard and a satellite dish was just a meager step this side of nobility. With that came the prospect of new friends and genuine happiness for the first time at age fifty-six.

That's when pop started hanging out with Uncle Russ more-or-less by default.

### 3

See, Uncle Russ, he was sort of a contradiction. He was like a bear tearing-ass through a dumpster: fun from far away, but you wouldn't want to hang around too close or for too long. There was an element of danger about him that even at my age I could sense. He was everything nobody else in the family was, and that wasn't saying much. Oh, I suppose the rest of the family had their qualities, I guess. They had *mystery*. That was if you considered bottling it all up and not sharing jack-shit mysterious. An occasional spite or critique designed to maim below the belt

was the extent of what you got, and only if you were good.

The thing was, Uncle Russ kept giving life a chance no matter how often it kicked him in the ribs when he was down. He was a resilient son-of-a-bitch if nothing else, but that's not to say that he was totally immune to the apathy strain himself. Get him in a crowded room, he was opinionated, blaring, an overall gut-buster sober or drunk. Plop him into a one-on-one situation, however, and he would drift. If you were lucky you got an arm around the shoulder and a somber discourse on the perils of growing up male in the post-Vietnam era. And nary a topic was overlooked:

Women: "*No one respects a broad who talks out of order . . .*"

Economics: "*Never trust a salesman with an accent. If he's an Arab, forget about it . . .*"

Patriotism: "*If you go for a revolver, buy a Colt . . .*"

Pride: "*Know what's worse than crying when you lose? Crying when you win . . .*"

Marriage: "*Never marry a woman comes from a country that's been conquered more than once . . .*"

Literature: "*Breakfast at Tiffany's was written by a fudge-packer, don't you forget it . . .*"

Etiquette: "*When in doubt, shut your mouth . . .*"

That's the one I remember the most.

### 4

Uncle Russ would take residence in Tehachapi less than six months after Moorland booked for greener pastures, and pop was out yet another sidekick. Things never lasted it seemed. They rarely did once pop found a comfort level with anybody.

Due to circumstances beyond his control, Uncle Russ was incapable of leaving town to visit family. It therefore became incumbent upon those who gave a shit to scrap their vacation plans for the privilege of dime-store advice, the reminiscence of crushed dreams, the overall embroidering of the places he'd seen, the people he'd met, the women he'd fucked and every other goddamn thing in creation.

With pop I think it was guilt more than genuine affection that took us out there one long weekend out of the year. He



and Uncle Russ never really got along, but the prospect of riding out grandpa's heartache caused by them not at least *pretending* to love each other was more than either man was willing to deal with. They would never admit to that, but it was easy to see if one cared to look for it.

5

The only good thing about the trip to Tehachapi was the drive. We were in pop's American Eagle station wagon creeping up highway 14 with Old Blue-Eyes occasionally breaking through the static on the radio. The AC was off cause we didn't have any-pop's idea of downgrading the salesman's commission for generally being a rude shit and a devout Celtic fan. That gyp made him happier than the ability to provide his family cool air between the months of June and September ever could have.

It was hot as boiling piss and I had my head hanging out the window taking jab after jab of desert air to the kisser. I didn't mind so much. The wind drowned out mom and pop's tire-some yelling to a distant murmur. It's not that they fought often; they just talked loudly at each other. And believe you me despite topics of future vacations, dinners and bedroom wallpaper patterns being bandied about, it was all about mutual ball-breaking. Love was volume. Love was sharing gripes and harboring pain. Love was feeling superior, even if only for a few minutes. Mom and pop must've achieved nirvana before I could wipe my own ass.

During those long spells I spent with my head in the elements time would stop. I'd gaze at the mountains in the distance growing out of the sand, or stare up at swaths of cirrus clouds; at the jet contrails scratching the sky from the runways that first shattered sound. I'd become hypnotized by the repetition of things—of the protruding bones of canted, wooden power-poles along the shoulder; of the four-legged electrical towers that took their place in the sage like something stalwart and malignant; of the cacti and Joshua trees weaving between them like a skeleton army attacking in slow, choppy stop-motion. I thought everything out there could kill, and I was fascinated by it all. It was a snapshot of Saturday afternoons spent wasting away the hours

with pop watching movie matinees in mutual silence. Popcorn fare like *Sahara*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, *The Searchers*, *Spartacus* . . .

6

I don't remember who won the argument that first trip. Probably mom. It didn't really matter. I was enjoying the ride, lost in time. I was ten years old and we were in our first desert trip visiting Uncle Russ in Tehachapi. It was a trek we would make four more times, though I stayed home for the last two. Once was really enough. I didn't need to see a prison two more times in my young life. I figured I'd see Uncle Russ after they finally cut him loose. It would be long with good behavior. He was doing a five-year stretch in the can for peddling stolen swag: hot eight-tracks, phonographs, second-hand trumpets, leather-bound scrapbooks, hollow-body electric guitars, antique guns, jazz records . . .

7

Last we heard of Uncle Russ was a postcard from Guadalajara three years ago. There was no return address. All we have left of him are a few illegitimate cousins and a small cache of hot memoirs.

Pop once let on while buzzed on Cognac that he planned to will me those jazz records after his demise from this rock. Watching him now still looking systematically for Satchmo's greatest hits, I have to wonder whose crap I'm really being bequeathed in the end.

Outside the neighbors twins have stopped their brawl and now lie quietly on the grass watching airplanes take off from nearby Burbank airport. Eventually their mother calls for them and one of them bolts inside. The one with the bloody nose remains awhile. He'd wiped off the blood but I could still see a drying smudge on his cheek that he'd missed. He follows a sleek white Cessna as it heads east, probably for Vegas. I follow it as far as the window jamb will allow. When I look back I notice he's looking right at me. I'm not sure how to react at first . . . his mug is so curious and sincere. I settle on a friendly smirk. He smiles back epically. There's a tooth missing upstairs, otherwise

he's flawless . . . vivacious and beautiful.

He waves a pudgy hand at me, then runs in after his brother.

I wonder if my son will look like that, if I'm lucky to ever have one. Maybe he'll turn out a classic-rock fan like his old man. Then again it seems as though musical taste spirals further down the toilet every year. If that sounds like the rantings of an older man, fuck it. Some things never change. I look over at pop again and realize I love him. I'm sure it's mutual, but I doubt that'll ever manifest itself into sound. Hopefully I'll do one better down the line and *he'll* know for sure. Then I think I'll finally feel all grown up and earned of the right to leave him my records. There's hundreds for him to choose from, and to keep someday if he wants. I bought them myself, so he won't have to worry about a goddamn thing.

## City Deli

Gianpiero Leone

from a tiny boat,  
a transient casts a line  
into the city lake  
seeking out his next meal.  
among the lotus  
the ducks are annoyed.  
the sun is setting,  
a baby duck submerges  
into the muck,  
a silence.

a serpent appears,  
its roller coaster spine  
emerges from the water  
devouring the boat and its captain.  
beyond the splashes

the screams  
the terror,  
a jogger whips by,  
a dog chases a frisbee  
a father and son play catch  
two old men engage in checkers.  
the serpent dives,  
a silence.

a baby duck surfaces  
a child's ball bounces into the lake  
the ducks seem annoyed again.

## The First Sip

Lenise Andrade

The first sip of a gin & tonic tastes like summer. No, more like early spring. It's the first touch of sun, the bright light that shines through the dark before. It's the promise of something lighter, something better, something with bubbles. That first sip is the perfect balance of gin to tonic and a sufficient squeeze of lime. Definitely need lime. Blend the strong with the light and add a touch of zing.

The next few sips are different every time. If you were talking, the ice has melted quickly, as it always seems to do with gin. Or maybe you were nervously stirring the swizzle stick while you watched someone at the bar. Maybe you decide to add more lime, to add more zing. (You're really in it for the vitamin C . . . didn't the English fight scurvy this way?) The next four sips are attempts to achieve the perfect freshness of that first sip. But like the first time you fall in love, so full of hope, naivete and faith, each sip is different, and with each sip you hope for so much more. Sometimes, you think it's the ideal balance. Sometimes you just blame the quinine. Then, before you know it—you're never quite ready for it—the drink is done. Your tiny skipping

stones of ice that were once rocks sit sadly at the bottom, pale comparisons to the now giant wedge of lime squatting there, squeezed beyond belief and now the center of your world.

The debate: To Suck or Not To Suck. Mostly this depends on where you're at. Alone or among true friends you dive right in, pluck the wedge between two fingers, put it to your wanting lips and bite down, sucking on the pulp so hard that the small pods of lime try to squeeze between your teeth to dive down your throat. In public, your decision depends on the people next to you, at the bar or in a booth. Sometimes, the lime doesn't even seem worth touching. With a lime that's shriveled or discolored you might skip it all together. You stare at that lime and it's your location and companions that make this decision for you.

Now you're faced with the decision of what to drink next. It's always easier to keep drinking the same drink, but sometimes there is a temptation towards something else. Something with ice, alcohol and a mixer. You'd never turn to wine or beer now. The ritual of ice and liquor has already roped you in. Suddenly a Cape Cod sounds good or maybe a screwdriver, since it's all about the vitamin C after all. But as any true gin & tonic drinker knows, as soon as you've ordered the first one, you're hooked for the night.

Someone once told me that a gin & tonic was an old man drink. I took it as a compliment. So often lately it's the sixty-four year-old man sitting by himself at the end of the bar that I end up talking to. I don't know if I see my future self in his eyes or if it's just that I want to hear his stories. But there is something beautiful in that old man, the youthful hope I can still make out in his eyes as he smiles at me and tells me jokes I think I've heard before. Behind those blue eyes of mischief I see he's doing what I'm doing. Each sip, yearning for the feel of the love he got from the first sip. The eternal beautiful search, a faithful longing for that lost love and the joy he's sure is right around the corner. I know that feeling, I've drunk those drinks and chased around those corners, sensed that need and want from the first sip on. I've sat at a bar, talked to a bartender and ordered another,

waiting for the next sip to be as perfect as that first one. And that blue-eyed man, who's seen so much and felt so much in his many years, is thinking this and feeling this as he takes another sip, wanting it to be the perfect balance of strong and bubble and zing and I know even before the bartender comes up what it is I'll be having because it's a gin & tonic night, a night to search and yearn for perfection. A night to fall in love instantly with that first sip and then slowly follow each sip around, the near misses that are worth the one that hits the tongue so perfectly. The old man sitting next to me knows that chase and is willing to try once again. And I love him for it, for sitting each night, in a dark yet familiar bar, waiting, hoping, praying at this altar to fall in love.

The morning after a gin drunk is the end of summer, where leaves have fallen and winter is settling in. It's where there is not enough water anywhere to fill the void of empty you've awoken to. It's the dry patch that is now your tongue and the loopy cloud that swells your head. The day after a gin drunk is the let down, the broken heart, the deep pressure in your chest where love once held court and you swear to never love again. Swear to never love or hope or dream because, really, your life is fine without it. You vow to be happy with the simple things, like a tall glass of water. You swear to lie in bed and wait, to be patient and enjoy what life gives you. No need for fanciful ideals of what you think your life could be like. Just be happy and content with simple pleasures and joys. Learn not to want to fall in love. Forget those blue eyes. Sleep more and drink lots of water. For after work, you'll once again be at the bar and the old man next to you will stir those cubes and the bartender will look at you and ask, "What'll you have?"

The first sip of a gin & tonic tastes like summer. No, more like early spring . . .

## Husband

Lisa Kelly

his hands, warm stones  
underneath a hot campfire  
dug up just to please me

## Grandfather

Annalysse

Because I'm not like Mom at all,  
I wonder if you left any traces in me . . .  
Was the dimple

Yours? Or did you leave a tippler's  
Weakness, the same one that rose you from the  
Bed, ridden with stroke, to get

Another last taste of intoxication?  
Was your horizon only as far as the wall of  
The tiny room for your family, mine,

So close, too close, had to be escaped?  
Didn't you ever want to see how  
The dimple looked on me?

When Mom pinned the Chinese dress  
And drew blood from her finger,  
I cringed, like she cringed,

When she saw the corner  
Cut off your identification card  
Signifying that it was no longer valid.

## Mr. and Mrs.

Stephani Torres

I see your reflection smeared  
through the dusty glass of the mirror,  
your skin, stretched, swollen and  
dimpled like August yeast.

Molding with my hands, I feel your  
aged face tumble towards me,  
lacquered with the smells of mothballs  
and mint; cigars and cinnamon

I take your coat, crude and heavy from hands  
calloused and pale like desert stones; bleached  
and coarse, and hang it lifelessly beside my own.

## Concerto #5

Alessander

The keys feel like raindrops splashing off my eyelids  
I wake to dream and find myself in a field of notes

And in this swirling field, the sweet torrents tatter  
My clothes right off, thus nude, swaying

To the swelling in me coursing like a neon river  
Forking at every thought, at every shiver

A surge rivets through my titanium veins  
I am slain and saved, saved and slain again

And in the ashes of this skin covered urn  
A ring, a picture, and a word.

## Immortalized–Buchenwald

---

Nancy Hubbs-Chang

Christ, there's another mountain; on we go.  
The German spring is blooming in our eyes,  
And when all this is ending, no one knows.

Thanksgiving Dinner was so long ago  
In helmet bowls, with turkey, sauce and pie . . .  
Christ, there's another mountain; on we go.

The Christmas Bulge was served ass-deep in snow.  
Ol' Bing was home that year while we all cried.  
And when all this is ending, no one knows.

There's fighting up ahead, we move in low  
And find a camp where folks are sent to die.  
Christ, there's another mountain; on we go.

The prisoners have won and stole the show.  
The Krauts have evidence they try to hide,  
And when all this is ending, no one knows.

There's children here, in tatters head to toe,  
The living and the dead lie side by side.  
Christ, there's another mountain; on we go,  
And when all this is ending, no one knows.

## The Moor

---

Stephanie Brewer

O African soldiers, you have come to call  
Sweetly, then conquered us all  
With you old

Negro, the fire lit!  
Burning all, strange fire and every lick cold  
And us licking still–Visigoths licking without spit

And you have Mons Calpe  
Or shall I say Gebel Tarik  
Do you remember your home?  
Of wooly hair and distant moan  
It's over–poet and raised scalp  
Crazed poets, with no knowledge to speak

O I should have known better!  
Umayyed, after the Romans–measure  
Moreno, not blanco *regir*  
Although deep and wide, a pure treasure  
I wonder how much it's worth  
The stolen home of our birth

Fit to be taken by force, if needed  
This is where and perhaps how we were cheated!  
I left a candle burning in case you lost your way  
Across the mountain and through the bay  
Burning still, left forever burning  
And hearts and minds began churning–learning

Poems and prose, philosophy and astronomy  
Darkness invaded our light  
Tough stuff!  
Smooth skin  
Holding the great wisdom within!  
A virtual slave to the economy

New friends new money  
O to eat human flesh without a care!  
I would clean the bones, much like you did, and only leave the  
hair  
In a pile, just like a dog–drool and all



Conquered you say?  
New Muslims old Spaniards—perhaps we are, but not today

Well, Welcome home!  
Our new friends—darkest night  
Your new house is beautiful—it's over there on the right  
I know you don't wish to stay alone  
Here's a young maiden girl for your pleasure  
And you thought the land was the *only* treasure!

With long brown hair and on tippy-toes  
Made just for you . . . everyone knows  
Her skin is like the babies left behind

She was supposed to marry Antonio tomorrow  
You assured him that it was just a quick borrow  
She cried all night

Well, Welcome home!

## Saying Good-bye

Susan Ahdoot

How embarrassing. Verbs  
fling themselves from eyebrows,  
nouns hang out between breasts,  
and adverbs mutinously hide behind  
teeth. Recently, consonants gather  
in the corners of my eyes and vowels leak  
from my ears. But it really is  
the most humiliating thing when  
y trips off my tongue.

## The Conspiracy

Taylor Ludeke

A man has no business out-living his grandchildren. That I know for sure. What I'm about to tell you really happened. I remember it all very clearly, well . . . It was one of those nights when I had to get out of the apartment. My roommates were brooding, and I had to get away . . . far away. Hiding in my bedroom would do it. In lieu of wandering the streets at eleven p.m., which in Hollywood has certain unpleasant connotations, I went to this bar down the block. It's a good bar. They make the drinks right. This is where the serious alcoholics hang. One Long Island Ice Tea could easily last someone my size the whole night, but after my first, I wanted to go home even less, so I ordered another.

They had some reality show on, but I can't watch that shit, so I was staring at the wall. I'd brought a book, but the words had started wiggling too much, so I was just sipping my drink and thinking. This old guy, dressed like Mr. Rogers, but scruffy around the jaw, sat on the stool next to me and stared right at me. I turned around, but there was no one behind me. I was sitting under the TV, so the weeknight stragglers, all loners, were staring over my head, but this guy was looking straight through me. I started to squirm, then he leaned in and said, "You're immune." He looked truly amazed.

Again I turned around, then said, "To what?"

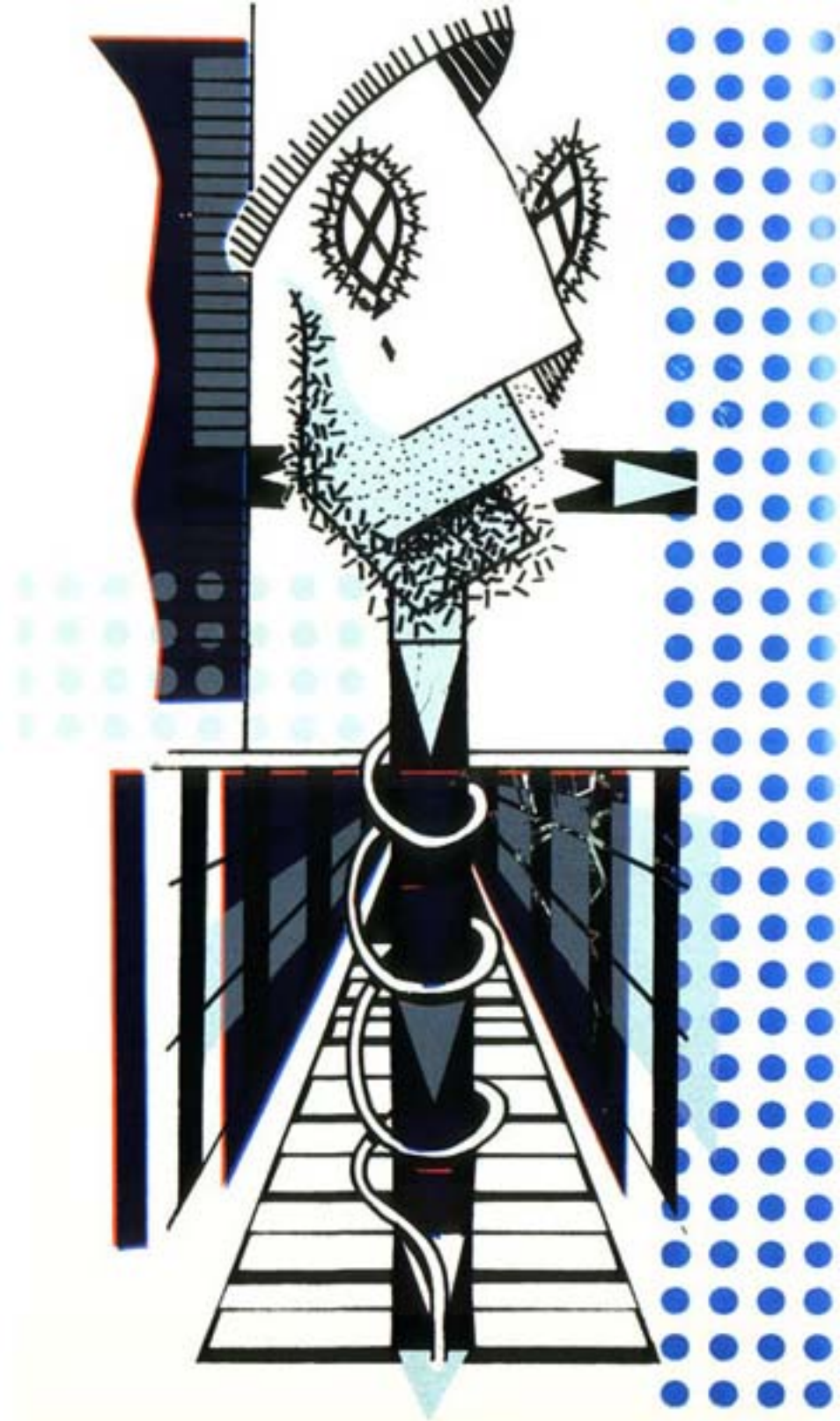
"The television." I could see it trying to pull his eyes away, but he fought it, real melodramatic like.

"Oh, I can't stand these shows."

"It doesn't matter," he muttered, then waved at our zombie companions. "Half of them don't even know what's on. They're too drunk, too tired, too depressed . . ." His voice wheezed. "But they stare at it anyway."

"The TV?"

"Yes!" The old man slapped the bar. He sounded crazy, but I had to admire his enthusiasm. He was really old, like nine-



ty easy, so he probably remembered before television. "Have you ever noticed, when you see the light through a window, it's always blue. It doesn't matter what's on, the ambient light is always blue . . . never yellow or green, and never ever red."

I thought about it. "Yeah, it does usually look blue. It flickers and changes though."

The man's eyes widened and he smiled, like he was pleased by my obvious intelligence, which was pretty sad, because even I noticed my slurring, but then I guess he'd been drinking, too. I noticed he was clutching half a scotch. And maybe I was watching for it more—signs of my drunkenness. You never want the crazies to know you're impaired. So he said, "Yes. The flicker. That's the key. That's what draws you in."

"Like a moth to a flame."

I've always been embarrassed how easily I turn to clichés when my mind's not together, but I picked the right one, because again the man slapped the counter and said, "Yes!" Now here is where I started to get a little fuzzy, because that second ice tea was kicking in, but how could I forget this. The man inhaled for like two minutes, then said, "It's my fault, you know." He breathed again slowly, then finished his scotch with one gulp. I noticed his hand shaking. He had trouble setting down the glass. Then I noticed the tears, so quiet and discreet in the dark bar. I waited patiently while he ordered another drink. After seeing a man that old crying, I had to give him some respect. "My granddaughter died this morning. A BRAIN TUMOR." He sounded out each letter, like he couldn't believe such words really existed. "Doctors didn't even have a chance to operate. I stayed with her, in the hospital, her last night. I'm ninety-three years old. Ninety-three, and the only family she had left." His sorrow overwhelmed me, paralyzed me. I wondered if I should hug him or squeeze his hand or something, but I did nothing. But I listened. "She was brilliant. An anthropologist. And so pretty. That boy she was seeing came by. Left daisies and a teddy bear . . . hugging a big, stuffed heart. He seemed like a nice fellow. Maybe he wanted to stay longer, but I made him uncomfortable." His wet, blurry eyes stared into his scotch. "I tell you, a man has no busi-

ness out-living his grandchildren."

He finished his drink, and waited several minutes before he began this confession. "There's something you must know." He looked around, overtly paranoid, then started whispering, "I never told anyone this before. I used to work for the CIA. I retired fourteen years ago, and I've been carrying this around with me for so long . . ."

*Shit, I thought. Sad old man is crazy old man, again, unless he's not, and then, I'm really in trouble.*

"Some say the CIA put heroin on the streets. That's just stupid. We did stuff, though. My project-television." I realized I *wanted* to hear some horrible secret, and his return to television let me down a bit. "We rigged it," explained the old man. "Tested people out on it like lab rats. Get them hooked, and they'll stay home, watch the boob tube, and not make trouble. The hum—you can't hear it, but it's there, and the flickering—seventy-two flashes per minute. That's no accident. That's what makes it addictive. We think it mimics the womb." He paused to contemplate. I accepted his words passively. I no longer tried to evaluate his state of mind or the validity of his story. I mean, what difference did it make? I just listened.

No one in the bar paid either of us any mind. They all stared at the television like the lonely individuals they were. Even the bartender watched the flashing screen, waiting for two o'clock.

"Then we discovered blue light," the man continued. "Sets emit a constant stream of blue light. Passes right through the screen. Nothing to do with the image. That's what numbs you, sedates you, makes your brain fall into a sleeping pattern." He tapped his head. "They don't do this in other countries." He slowly shook his head. "I didn't realize what it'd do to the American Family, and now . . . ADD . . . memory disorders." I glanced around at all the blank, detached faces. The old man sank his face into his hands. "I just wanted to prevent terrorism." Then he stared me in the eyes. "At least . . ." He stopped talking. His eyes didn't close. His posture didn't even change. He just stopped.



I stared and waited. It took over a minute for me to get up the nerve to actually touch him, first his wrist, then his neck. I told the bartender to call 911. It was two, so he was already kicking everyone out. We left the old man sitting on the stool, and no one even noticed he was dead. They stumbled, out like cows, the way they do every night when the bartender sends them home. No one noticed me and the old man stay behind. The paramedics tried CPR to be kind, then put him in a body bag.

My grandfather died when I was in high-school. I didn't see him die. He passed in his sleep at the nursing home. Watching this man die made that intangible fate very real. I can't forget him. I felt almost ashamed that he died talking to me, a stranger in a bar. I regretted that the last thing he spoke of wasn't his life or his loved ones, but television. Everyone knows TV is bad for you, they just don't care. But if he considered it so important that he had to stay alive long enough to tell me about it, then that makes it important. And I guess I owe him, because we do have some really great TV shows.

## Still, the Sirens Sing of Troy Burning in Men's Hearts

Alessander

What is it about us oldest of sages?  
that reels us into the traumatic temptress  
had we hard friends to strap us to the mast  
while the sirens sing, nipples hard, of cast  
aways that realized the quick comfort in their caress  
but how long since that journey now . . . *really*, ages?

And still are we lulled to the putrid flesh  
the yellow skin, the raw rancor of the heart

the calculating eyes that never quite reflect  
merely consume—but oh, how we correct!  
the deformities part by diligent part  
like a mud mortician with a needle and brush

and some favorable picture of the recently deceased  
No, we must let her rot! We must douse the vigil  
we must gut her and dissect, not feel, the squirmy truth  
we must sniff the black soot spuming from her mouth  
where are you old sages Yeats, Dante, Virgil  
have none of you yet paid for my release?

## 2030: An Easter Fantasy

Nancy Hubbs-Chang

"This is gonna be great. They won't suspect a thing."

Lucifer rubbed his hands briskly in gleeful anticipation. Behind him, the Hordes of Hell waited, their hands or talons or tentacles grasping their weapons. Clawed or cloven hoofed feet twitched and skittered on the hot stone floor of the doorway leading from Hell.

"All that crap about the world ending in 2000, 2001. Dumbass humans couldn't even add right. So we're all a little late. Catch 'em off guard. Even that punk Kid dropped hints they wouldn't know for sure when He'd be back to save their whiny little souls."

"I dunno, Boss," one demon dared to squeak. "Things've been pretty quiet up there for a while." It jerked a clawed thumb in the direction of the Earth's surface.

Lucifer glared at his minion for interrupting his diatribe. "Yeah, maybe. But all the panic was fun for a few years, huh?" He rolled up a sleeve of his expensive designer shirt and checked the time on his sleek gold watch. "Let's get to it!"

The sleeve rolled itself down and changed into the forearm piece of a suit of red and orange spiked armor as the Lord



of Hell led his troops up and out.

Over the rim of the world, four horsemen sat their mounts on a massed thunderhead.

The horses, or so they appeared, waited with unnatural calm: not stamping a forehoof, not leaning hip-shot, not champ-ing a bit. They had more of the tense patience of hunting beasts waiting to spring than of warhorses.

The riders waited as well for their Leader. One was dressed in olive and khaki battle fatigues. One wore a white laboratory coat. Yet another wore an asphalt-dark suit, pinstriped with lines of concrete grey, that hung off his emaciated frame. Their final companion, the one on the pale horse, wore black robes that obscured his features, but a skeletal hand led from one long sleeve to grasp a scythe.

Pestilence rolled his eyes at his brother. "Can't you modernize at least a little for the occasion?"

The shadowed hood turned slowly toward the white-coated questioner. "Some of us," a voice hissed from within, "remember our role here and now. Appearances are important and should not be subject to mortal flux. At any rate, they will recognize me," the voice finished with a withering emphasis.

"Yeah, if only from that Halloween nonsense," muttered Famine. He checked his Rolex for what seemed like the thousandth time that morning already. "I hate to sound disrespectful, but *when* is He going to get here?"

"For a being that works slower than any of his brethren," a quiet voice from behind them gently chided, "you have far less patience than they."

The riders whirled in their saddles. Their horses, unlike mortal mounts would have done, budged not an inch.

Behind them was their Leader, dressed in the simple blue and white robes He always favored. Now, however, one hand held a gleaming sword, a weapon He had never used on Earth. He sat a pure white unicorn that pranced, unbridled, untacked, restless beneath His hand. The glory that shone from Him was almost unbearable to behold, even for the four that faced Him.

"Sorry, Sir," Famine half-whispered. "Dealing so much in mortal affairs . . . it kind of rubs off on one after a while."

A snort of derision came from the shadowed hood of the pale rider, but was quickly silenced.

"The time has come, faithful ones," their Leader said. "The Legions await."

Behind them all was massed the forces of the Host: some mounted, some on foot, nearly all winged. They drew swords, lances, maces and other weapons at an unseen, unheard command.

The Leader nodded once.

The air groaned and split with the sudden weight of the riders of the sky as they plunged toward Earth.

Between the Hordes of Hell and the oncoming Host of Heaven, the Earth itself heaved.

Graves that had been forgotten through millennia, graves that had been filled the day before, all disgorged their contents as the combatants approached.

Pale bodies crawled out of Guaranteed Neva-Rot lead-sealed walnut-trimmed coffins. Skeletons darkened with age and dirt broke free of splintery wood. Mausoleum drawers slid free of marble enclosures.

One by one, the former mortals chose sides for the coming conflict.

The gathered units of the armies of the afterlife glared at each other across a darkling plain.

The sun, eclipsed by a blood-red moon, shadowed to sackcloth.

All of creation seemed to hold its breath.

Weapons were lifted.

Swung aloft.

Lowered in confusion.

"WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY?!" Lucifer screamed in exasperation.

It was true. There was not a current mortal to be seen

anywhere outside.

The hosts glanced at each other, puzzled, then shrugged nearly simultaneously, and scattered to investigate the nearby buildings.

The mortals were there.

In living rooms, dining rooms, dens, bedrooms.

All of them entranced, all focused on a single goal, seemingly.

All of them blissfully ignoring everything but the plastic helmets on their shaved heads, the slim pads under their fingertips, the light-flashing goggles over their eyes, the giant screens blazing in front of them. The flashing scenes were almost as beautiful, as horrendous, as earthshaking as the tableau outside their windows would have been.

"When do they piss?" one demon wondered. He answered his own question later when he found one intent young woman in her bathroom, sitting on the toilet, her attention riveted by a portable unit over her face.

"Wait a minute, hang on. This is too weird," Lucifer complained.

The sounds of computer games continued unabated as the armies returned from their inspection.

"Let's review, okay?" Lucifer ticked each point off on his clawed fingers. "The Earth is cracked open, finished, kaput. The pipelines are down, the wires are snapped, even the solar panels aren't any good any more. Where the Hell are they getting the power for this?" he finished, waving his hands in exasperation.

"Geothermal?" the Heavenly Leader asked, a half-smile in His voice.

"Don't get cute, Kid," Lucifer growled. "Wasn't my idea . . . Hey! Nerd!"

Pestilence looked over at the hail.

"What about that theory the mortals had a while back, about 'electromagnetic radiation'?"

"What about it?" the lab-coated figure called back. "My specialty was bacteriology."

"Yeah, well, did they ever figure out what its ultimate effect would be?"

"How should I know? I've kept my nose in fewer other peoples' heads than you have the last few years."

Lucifer sighed. "Yeah, but I always thought lawyers were a better angle."

"And you do not see the 'loophole' in this?" the Leader said, still slightly amused. "After all this time, since the beginning, you have fought with Us over them. Why?"

"For their presence now, Ya nit!" Lucifer railed.

"If sheer numbers were all you needed, you could have bred your demons to fill that need. What else was there?"

Lucifer ground his pointed teeth, a sound not unlike nails on a chalkboard. "The power and worth of their souls. You know that as well as I do."

"Then perhaps it is the power of their souls, or at least their mortal bodies, that run such things now. The radiation they have absorbed over the years is now strong enough to continue their obsession."

"Yeah, and not much else. Amazing their brains haven't drooled out their ears. Yo, Kipling!" Lucifer called over to the Hosts of Heaven. "Looks like you were right with that poem of yours!"

"Which one?" came back a dry, British-accented voice.

"Which one?" Lucifer mimicked under his breath. "Asshole. You know," he continued, louder, "'Tomlinson'?"

"They ignore the 'printed book' now as much as us, Old Scratch," the voice returned, using the nickname just to annoy Lucifer further.

The Lord of Hell turned his attention to the opposition Leader again and steadfastly ignored the writer. "What was that bit again about you wanting them to be either hot or cold, Kid? Something about not being indifferent to the whole thing?"

"What I originally spoke of back then was the concept of concern for their souls, of concerning themselves with their fel-

low humans and world. Ultimately, of how they spent their lives, for right or wrong.” He shook His head in disappointment. “It had been harder and harder to hear them clearly in recent years, despite their claims.”

“Yeah, well, what’s the point of all this,” Lucifer indicated the milling hosts, “if we don’t have an audience, know what I mean? I say we let Daddy Dearest just grind ‘em up and start over again. I don’t think they’d even notice.”

“They must have the choice of their souls’ ultimate fate.”

“Yeah, You always were pretty big on that free will nonsense.” Lucifer shook his own head at the Leader of the Hosts of Heaven. “Shoulda joined me when You had the chance, Kid. Frankly, I don’t think You’re gonna get much value out of that lump of protoplasm You call humanity now.”

The Leader smiled beatifically, which made Lucifer wince with its brightness. “Neither, I think, will you, which is some consolation.”

Lucifer sighed again and surveyed the former mortals on both sides. “Eeeesh. Looks like we’re just about even with what we’ve got here. How do You want to settle this?”

“With something they can recognize.”

John “Userboy” Jungmann popped his hat, removed his finger pads, and rubbed his eyes. “Highest score yet. Kickin’,” he said to the empty room. He turned slightly to open the mini-fridge next to his desk and found the light had gone off inside. The interior was growing lukewarm. He shrugged, only slightly concerned, and took out a microwave dinner, casually tossing the box into the waiting maw of a nearby oven. The door shut automatically.

John waited for the motor to kick in as he stood and stretched.

Nothing.

He shrugged again. He wasn’t all that hungry anyway, and he had time for another game before the dinner finally melted and he’d have to cook it somehow before it started smelling funny. He regained his seat in joyful anticipation and linked up

again.

One new game in the World List looked promising and he selected it. The computer hummed and whirled as it loaded the program.

“JUDGEMENT DAY!!!” flared across the screen. John’s goggled eyes saw it leap out of the flat glass at him in true 3D.

“Kewl. Hope it’s not that old T2 crap.”

More announcements: “NOW fully interactive! YOU fight on the side of the angels and kick demonic butt! YOU risk your immortal soul to become a demon and send those goody two-wings packing! Win the chance for the ultimate paradise getaway, or spend eternity writhing in torment!”

“All *right*! Bring it on, dudes!” John cracked his knuckles, careful of the wiring on his fingerpads.

“Join your friends, your family, total strangers in the Ultimate Battle! Billions now playing worldwide!”

## Before His Cremation

Patrick Curl

When I lifted dad’s heavy form  
so I could wrap my anxious life around it,  
before the thick furnace door closed in at him and the red  
bulged behind the soot-covered glass I imagined  
when they set his bulk of ashes into the dirt  
and I knew I should cry;

When I pressed his head stiff into my yellow turtleneck;  
When I felt his brown curls quick then pulled back and  
rested my hand awkward on the bump behind his neck,  
I wondered if I jhad hugged him long enough;

And when I kissed his drained cheek  
I wondered if mom thought I was mature.

## About the Author

Tuli

Most days i write a biography about myself in my mind:

Some piece of idealization  
found in the back of a book  
of everything i'm not:  
witty and cunning  
European and male  
an addict  
and a genius  
a non-Idahoan  
a dancer  
who knew which fork to use  
at fancy dinner parties.

All these things, which shaped my life  
into something i'll never know.

## Losing A Loved One: A Lesson in Grief and Recovery

James Noon

Has it really been a decade since the fateful day that God summoned my mother home? Yes, as difficult as it has been for me to accept, the faithful and loving spirit, with the lilting Irish brogue, has been gone for ten years. She was my mentor—my pillar of strength. It was she who had all the answers, and it had always been her faith that carried me through my most trying times. My mother's death, the most traumatic period of my life, forced me to find a way to cope with the process of grieving, on my own, without the benefit of her guiding hand.

Over the years, I have learned that in the course of human events, the likelihood that one will experience significant emotional loss during one's lifetime is as certain as death and taxes. Loss is indeed inevitable. We lose our jobs, our pets, our wallets, and sadly, our loved ones. What makes it difficult, as I learned from personal experience, is that the bereaved often have no alternative but to attempt to navigate through their grief without anything resembling a compass or roadmap. According to John W. James and Frank Cherry, co-founders of the Grief Recovery Institute and co-authors of the *Grief Recovery Handbook*, "The process of moving through intense emotional pain has become so private and misunderstood that most of us have very little idea of what the process is or how to deal with it" (James 3).

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has been called the world's foremost expert on the subject of death and dying. In her book, *On Death and Dying*, Dr. Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief (denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), as they pertained to terminally ill patients. I am more than vaguely familiar with three of the five, as denial and anger both manifested themselves as speed bumps on my road to acceptance. According to James and Cherry, Dr. Kubler-Ross's stages "can also be applied to the bereaved . . . (although) these stages do not necessarily occur in the same order for the bereaved as they do for the terminally ill" (6). Therefore, the path to acceptance that a dying patient must travel can, at times, still be dramatically different from what is experienced by surviving loved ones.

The dictionary definition of "denial" is: "Refusal to admit the truth of a statement or charge; assertion that something alleged is false" (Webster 197). On the day of my mother's wake, I kept a four-hour vigil near her open casket while a parade of mourners paid their respects. At my mother's request, there was no "official" service, so when a representative from the mortuary gave the family a few moments to bid our final farewells, I froze. I could not bring myself to turn and walk away. After hours of sitting in shock, I refused to accept the fact that my mother was already gone.



After a few days, my denial yielded to feelings of anger and rage. The initial object of my anger was my mother. I was simply beside myself that there had been no true memorial service. I needed closure, and my mother had failed to recognize that her dying wish deprived me of a means to achieve it. Of course, she was not alone on my list. Next, I directed my anger at God. He had let me down just when I needed him the most. My rage became unbearable and was compounded by a series of unfortunate coincidences that only served to fuel my ire. Over the next few weeks, everything in my life went wrong, and my anger grew substantially. My life was falling apart. In lieu of taking my anger out on those around me, I began exorcising my rage and frustration by writing poetry and song lyrics that helped me deal with my feelings, and I ultimately worked through my anger by allowing myself to feel the pain that my anger was attempting to mask. According to Dr. Kubler-Ross, "Anger is a feeling that passes, not a state of being" (Kubler-Ross, *Life Lessons* 156). By expressing my feelings, rather than burying them, I was able to move past the anger that was built up inside of me.

Once my feelings of anger began to subside, I found that acceptance was not too far behind. I realized that loss is something that we all must cope with at one time or another. To not experience loss is to not experience love and life. Dr. Kubler-Ross points out that "[t]he only thing that lives forever is love" (Kubler-Ross, *On Life* 82). When we love and when we lose those we love, only then can we be sure that we are truly alive. The most important thing is to have the courage to feel. It is this capacity that allows us to continue to experience the things that matter in life. It is a risky proposition to feel, and while the pain can be unbearable, the ability to love and to be loved, even if only for a brief moment, must be reason enough to persevere.

I cannot claim that my experiences of grief and loss fit any textbook definition, and I won't pretend that any book helped me to cope with the tragedy of losing my mother. However, as I reflect on the love I have for her and the ten years that have passed since she died, I realize that in reality, she never really left me. Her spirit remains alive in me and in all those who

remember her beauty and grace. In my heart and soul, I can still hear her lilting Irish brogue as she lives on, in me.

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## Acknowledgments

*Inscape* was edited by English 7 students

Julia Casillas

Eric Doyle

Gladys Hernandez

Nancy Hubbs-Chang

Alessander

James Noon

Cheryl Quiroz

Anita Snieszko

Miss Chockie Tom

and

Annie Wong

under the direction of

Instructor Manuel Perea;

Serigraphs were printed by students enrolled

in Graphic Communications Technology

classes under the direction of

Associate Professor Kris Pilon.

*Inscape* was printed by Printing Services at PCC

with Student Services and PFE funds.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to all who contributed.