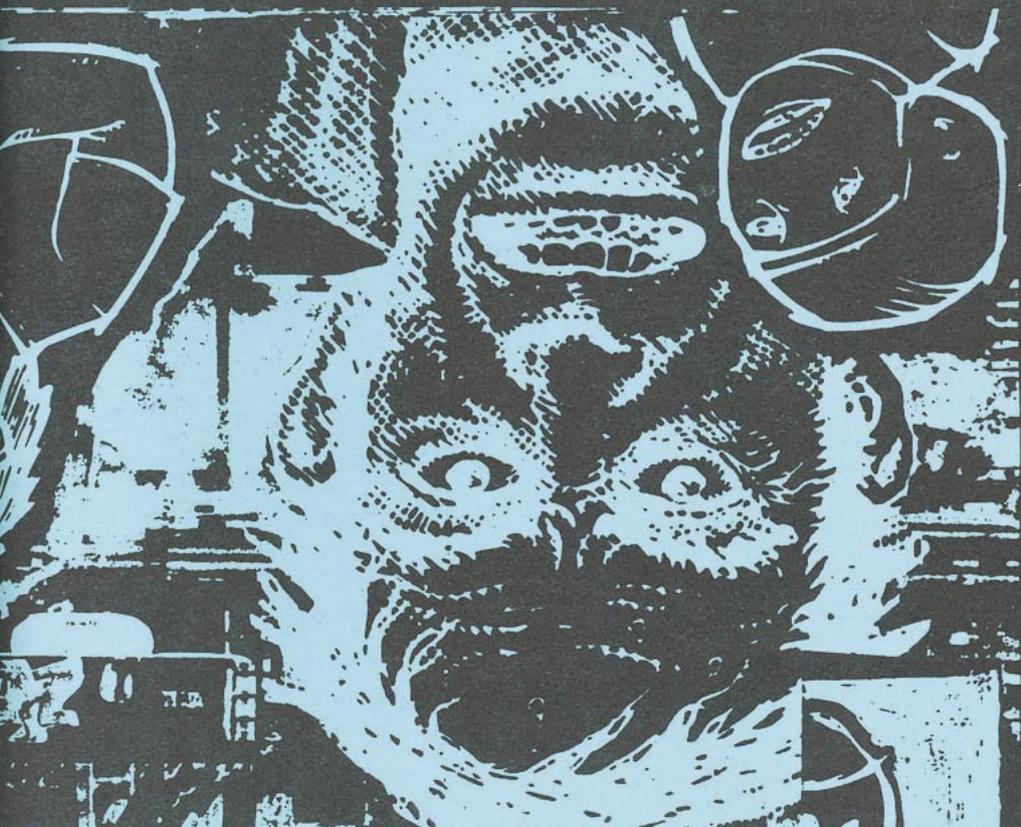


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INSCAPE 2004

AN ANTHOLOGY

PASADENA CITY COLLEGE
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

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STEPHANIE SOLIS

Giving Birth

1.

To your left we see a former captive.
Who, for the better part of a year, was
subject to ultimate control
Had no say in even what to eat, can you
believe it, people.
Trapped in isolation and darkness—
We would never expect such recovery.
I assume you can barely fathom the bravery.
Let's congratulate it on this day of freedom!
The release of a prisoner.

2.

To your right we see the expulsion of the parasite.
The final eviction of the foreigner
Who, for the better part of a year, dared to
share your body
Stealthily mooching everything you consumed
Absorbing your energy
And hitching rides without permission
Or ever
Pitching in for gas.

P. J. EMERY

Early Thaw

In February
A chinook can surprise this river
Tapping the water awake
With its warm fingers
Inviting it to carry away
Shards of its pristine mirror prison wall;
Just as quickly
The trickster wind will disappear
Abandoning dancing blocks and chunks
To collide and set
And the jagged plain that forms
Is matched only by
A searing pain in the river's elbow
That cries for spring.

STEPHANIE BREWER

Trying to Find Love in NYC

In the cold crush of day and night
Presun training has begun
Somersaults and jumping jacks before the
starter pistol
A novice to the game, but intrest on winning
Perhaps a gold star on my lapel
It sounds so masculine-lapel
On a tall handsome suit jacket
Or maybe a short stock army uniform . . .

CARA CORNGOLD

2003

I want to live in a '40s era Western.
Buttery, spread-eagle skies hugging my
Broke-down, gingham-curtained cabin; my
Rocking chair yawning on the front porch;
Mangy, yellow dogs rolling in the muck
Of our sloughed-off excesses. Chickens pecking
Dirt. Elbow grease. And true grit.
Actions are intent; consequences swift.
We all pack equally weighted guns,
Validating Justice.

**Winner of 2003 Creative Writing Contest
Best Short Story**

JOSEPH MATTSON

**A Bloody Dove, Three Bums,
War, and Not Another Drink**

There I was in the center of my city, downtown Los Angeles, down by Pershing Square, at 5th and Olive: a man with absolute solicitude and specifically nothing to lose.

It was six and I was drunk and there's no denying that. But I was still thirsty.

The sun was about to go down, evening in there a bit, but hot as a mother. I was walking toward Los Angeles St. because anybody who's anybody down here knows the best place to get a drink is King Eddie's on the corner of 5th and Los Angeles St., right in the heart of Skid Row. But I was a wee broke, no cash coins jangling in the pocket, only a set of keys to a friend's little bungalow in East Hollywood and a lucky dime I found smashed down by the railroad yard, which has brought me about as much luck as an ornery jackass's hoof in the chops, which is to say not much luck at all.

I squint up at the sun and raise my imaginary glass in my empty fist up to the heavens and thank thee Gods fer something, I don't know what; life I guess. Bah!

I don't ask for spare change, never have, never will. I'm down. I'm out. I'm a fool, but there's the pride, banging like an old engine right here in my chest, like an old engine that will just never cease, for good or for ill.

But in my shirt pocket I do have Mabel's ring, or rather the ring I was going to give to

her just before she left me. Ah, these high holy days of shit loneliness. I'm too drunk. I'm too hot tempered. I'm too dissatisfied no matter what. The list goes on, and it's all true, and she pinned it right into the skin of my heart so's I'll never forget why I lost her.

There's the jewelry district a little cock-eyed of a way out of the way to King Eddie's. They're sure to give me at least fifty and a fiver for the ring, although I paid much more.

At the corner of Hill and 5th I passed an odd looking man on his knees mumbling in prayer with a raggedy old and torn TV Guide in his hand as if it were the Bible. He was wearing green overalls and an orange construction style helmet. He had neon pink exercise socks pulled up over the legs of the bibs and a pair of white Chuck Taylor's, only they were no longer exactly white, but grey with the dirt an' all. When I walked toward him it sounded like he was speaking in tongues; the only unciphered word I could make out was "Jhee-sauce," meaning Jesus.

Then all at once he stopped and spoke clearly.

"My friend," he said to me, and then to himself he said, "Thank you Jheesauce."

"Hello," I said.

"Thank you Jheesauce. Can you give me a dollar thank you Jheesauce," he said.

"I don't have it," I said.

"Just a few quarters for a bite to eat thank you Jheesauce," he said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Thank you Jheesauce. I just need some money for a hot dog or some tacos thank you Jheesauce thank you," he said.

"I have none," I said, my breath a little short. "Take care."

The man went back to the tongues and closed his eyes and held the TV Guide high and

kept on with the Jheesauce, Jheesauce. I stared at him for a minute, bewildered by this thing called life.

I closed my own eyes for a moment and inhaled deeply. The second passed and I opened them once more.

The heat was starting to get to me. At dusk it's supposed to cool about five degrees, then another five when the sun goes over the hills, and another ten maybe when the black closes in. The sun was on the hill and by fuck it was still hot as a mother. I began to sweat something fierce, crossing over 6th St. on my way south toward jewelry town.

I pulled the ring out and looked at it some more. You shit, I said to myself, miserable. I was going to hock the thing for a spot of booze and that poor bastard back up the street was thanking Jheesauce and getting nothing. For me, the world had grown absurd. I thought about Mabel and I saw her face in the shim of the ring. My whole body ached for her. I will love that woman until the end of time, God willing there's even some of that left.

Just then the bus pulled up. I boarded without really thinking about it. When I got on I just kind of stood there in the stairwell.

"Well," the driver said.

I didn't say a word.

"Pass? Tokens?" he said.

I remained silent.

"Jesus," said the driver, closing the door.

Usually if you get on the bus and stand there looking foolish/down/embarrassed, with no change, no pass, no tokens, the driver will most likely just pick up and head for the next stop, expecting you to get off there.

The bus went up to the next stop and the driver opened the door. I didn't budge. He was

listening to NPR on a little black portable radio. It was just two weeks after the terrorist attack on America. Selfishly enough, I didn't know what I was more broke up about: war or losing Mabel, and losing Mabel was over a year before and running me long into the ground. I still wasn't over it.

"Here's your stop," the driver said.

"Hollywood," I mumbled.

"Goin' south," the driver said.

"Hollywood," I said, raising my voice. The NPR discussion had suddenly turned from the arrest details of some possibly involved in orchestrating the suicide plane crashes to the possibilities of biological warfare.

"I want to go to Hollywood," I said. "I have this ring, I'll give it to you, it's very pretty, amethyst, you can give it to your wife, you can have it, just turn this rig around and get to the 101."

I wanted to see her, even if from a distance. I wanted to see the house, touch the bushes we once shared. I wanted to know for sure if life was real.

"This is your stop," the driver said, cool, stern, and he looked me in the eye.

"Get the fuck off tha' bus, fool!" some older lady hollered from down the aisle. "I got to gets these chops in the pan before salmonella sets in!"

I slunked down against the handrail for a moment, exasperated, and with a slight angelic sigh I dragged myself as if by the shirt off of the bus.

It was now the corner of Hill and 7th. When Mabel and I first moved to Los Angeles, years ago, we lived at 7th and Catalina. I headed in that direction. The whole block was strangely empty, the way a city is in a post-holocaust movie. There was but one soul up the

block and as I neared him I pulled out the crumpling butt of my last Winston, which I had been puffing on once or twice a day for about four days.

I got half-way up the block and looked at the guy. He looked like Grady from *Sanford & Son* and he was bowed over talking to a parking meter.

This was something.

He wasn't just babbling; the man was serious. He was speaking to the thing like it was his wife, saying very gentle and comforting things. He was begging it, caressing the top of the thing like it was the head of a woman. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic bag and put the thing on top of the meter, not pulling it down over it, but resting it up there. He was quiet for a second, just looking at the meter with immense love in his eyes. "I do. I do," he said softly. He started to tousele the bag as if it were hair, gazing proud, yet lost. Then he started to cry.

I couldn't take it. To hell with Catalina and 7th. We hadn't lived there in years. We were on Sycamore and Willoughby in Hollywood when Mabel gave me the shove. Now the country had gone to war and Jheesauce wouldn't give me a dollar to pass to one of his disciples, I couldn't get another drink, and Grady of 7th St.'s wife was a parking meter and had a plastic grocery bag for hair.

I tossed the done cigarette butt and ran as fast as I could back to Pershing Square, pushing thirty years old and feeling like less than nothing.

Breathless when I got there, I stood on the ledge of the plaza, facing northwest, facing Sycamore and Willoughby miles off in the city's distance. Then I closed my eyes. "I love

you Mabel," I whispered. I found the house there in my mind and pulled out the ring. Holding it firm in my sweaty hand for a moment, I then clenched my teeth and with my eyes still shut tight I threw the damn thing all the way to Hollywood.

When I opened my eyes a bloody dove with a broken wing stumbled deathly by and the sadness of the world was complete.

NINA RUEDAS

Solidify

You were sound asleep
and dreamed as if no one were there.
You tossed and you turned
and as you awoke you heard whispers in the air.

But fear not what you awaken to.
Is this what you thought you dreamed?
Instead be horrified by what you dreamt last night
as you let your unconscious seep.

You let it surface above the water.
You let it solidify in the air.
Then as you awake
you forget what you thought was there.

Will

Has the scar healed Daddy?

Stupid question.
Scars that big don't go very far

The first time under the knife
Dr. Blood told you and mom that with chemo and
radiation,
you could buy up to 3 extra months,
on top of the 3 he already gave you

Dulled and depleted
You left, denied of even half a year to live
If you took his advice

You lay in bed for days, I remember
Not quite depressed

Discouraged
probably
Disillusioned
definitely
Disappointed
Of course, maybe even
Disturbed

But only a distraction did this distant form
of death cause
So you changed direction all together

The pills, the appointments, the plastic,
the poison they tried to pollute you with,
we put in the past

You choose love to revive life

And it was five more years
Until you had to go back under the knife

This time you weren't all I had to worry about
lying in the hospital bed
But mom sitting next to you holding her head
in her hands

Wishing I was there to share the fear
because who would waste time
while she waited,
for the wait in the waiting room
wringing her hands
and biting the inside of her lip

This time all I could do was cry to a phone
devouring the flesh behind my lip too
It had become only minutes now between
lightning joints
Sedation wasn't enough to forget
But just enough to suppress the logic that was
setting in
And let denial soothe the doubt

It was only you daddy that knew it wasn't through
You told me you weren't going anywhere soon
and laughed
Twenty-five more years you said
And no more
No more hospital beds

You had been hiccuping for over a week without sleep
They said it was from the pressure of the
tumor on your brain stem
Which meant you were near the end

In the face of death you held your name high
and it became apparent why
You were born to the name will

Now in a new country with a new scar you live

happy with new hope
Proof that only love can make you healthy

AMANDA-FAYE JIMENEZ

Poppo

I stand on the edge of the grass
with him
on the edge

for now he is lucid,
clearly
he tells me how proud he is
how smart I am, how
educated . . .
he doesn't remember *everything*,
clearly.

"you connect words so well,"
he says,
"I've never been able to do that,
effectively."

but his words are splitting me in half
the lawn shifts
he sprays the hose on the dry parts
his eyes are wet

I can feel myself walking away
before my feet move
don't cry Poppo, it's okay
how's the cat?

where's grandma?

the cat is fine
his eyes are wet
he sees me now,
clearly
despite foggy glasses

a cloudy tear falls as I turn to leave
I'll come by later, okay?
I won't, I don't.
I'm the one who has forgotten,
clearly

TED HALE

Under the Ice

We walk outside to the frozen lake
where we put on our skates.
As I glide along the ice, I notice
letters appearing
where the blades touch. The other skaters
move along, each at their own
rhythm. Our skates
form letters, words, whole lines.
I knew we had entered
an enchanted place. I watch the poem
each person creates. Whole poems
fill the lake. The ice
melts as the words
break through me. Then I wake
to see a roomful of poets writing poetry.

The Poet

Her beady eyes roll a rolling blue
Waves like the oceans
That she desperately sought to be a
Deeper part of . . .

One cracked hand after the other
Beating the life back into her words
One by one
Craving her death with typewritten glory

Hoping time will stop
To lend her some
Silence
Blackness

No static to interrupt

She wipes the weary water from her eyes
Carefully spilling tears
Where they rightfully belong-
On a burnt ember
Of yesterday's news

She stops
Because the world cannot stop for her.

A Pyrrhic Victory

It was a cool, gray morning and the sun was
mounting the sky behind a thick blanket of
clouds. A car alarm went off down the
street.

He cut himself a piece of cake and took a
mouthful, swallowing so quickly he coughed and
sputtered and had to wash it down with coffee.
As usual, she had put too much cream in it – not
to mention sugar. And by now it was lukewarm.
He nearly gagged, just for show. She stood by
the refrigerator, tapping her foot on the floor,
watching him intently. He looked out of the win-
dow, at the weeds growing up the wooden fence
that separated their yard from the neighbors'.

"Good cake," he said, and jammed some more
in without looking at it.

She turned away, opened the refrigerator,
and brought out a jar of jam. Her toast was
done, and she lifted it onto a plate. Jam in
one hand, plate in the other, butter knife
between her teeth, she made for the cramped lit-
tle alcove that contained their cramped little
two-person table, sat across from him, and began
very methodically to smear congealed chunks of
strawberry preserve and opaque red film onto her
single slice.

There were gray-brown shadows under her
eyes, and her mouth was drawn down at the cor-
ners. She wore a purple bathrobe, but her hair
was already combed and arranged into a neat high
bun, still slightly damp. The scent of humid
rotting flowers rose from her skin. It was an
artificial, manufactured smell. He hated sham-
pooos like that, and the scented bath oils of
which she bought so many. She had at least five

different neatly delineated bottles: two variants on peach, one papaya, one rose, and a noxious blend of wild berry and melon. He could tolerate the rose; it reminded him of his mother. But today she sported the watermelon berry.

He coughed, considered drinking some more coffee, decided against it. He asked instead, trying to sound interested, "Why the cake?"

She looked up from her plate. (Had she been counting the crumbs? he wondered.) She finished chewing and replied, "Ella had extra. She bought lots for some party at work but didn't end up using it."

"It's good. Try some."

She shook her head. "I hate frosting."

Finally he did quaff some more of the saccharine brew before him. "Well," he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, scattering crumbs.

He placed an elbow on the table, made a fist, and rested his cheek there, watching her. For a moment or two she made a ridiculous show of pretending she didn't notice his appraisal, looking down at her toast, chewing the latest mouthful. Then suddenly — as if she had caught a whiff of that same wind blowing that had made him so ready for a confrontation — a meeting of gazes if not of souls — she looked up. For a second they were suspended in time, a tableau of silent domestic friction.

Her slightly blood-shot eyes wide, her mouth turned down at the corners, she made no physical effort to be impassive. She didn't need to; she was in her element. Placid malice. Very good, he admitted. very, very good. Even-better than me.

Himself, he was more than a little worn out. Sometimes — and he admitted it — he became vulgar. (That gagging on the coffee, for instance, or even, once, pouring out her bath oil and returning the empty bottle to its regu-

lar place.)

She, never.

This was strange. At one time he had admired her self-control, had called it grace. Now he couldn't help but hate it. When she had first begun to withdraw into herself so expertly — (and when had *that* been, exactly? — he wasn't sure — but how things just bled softly into one another!) — he had been afraid. Afraid, because her strength, it seemed, only set off more strongly his own inherent hysterical tendencies.

But he was learning, too. He had by now learned, for instance, to abandon his bluster, his chorus of self-deprecating, nervous laughter in the face of situations he did not understand.

There *had* been once — but it had been very long ago . . . once he had caught her radically uncomposed.

High school. Behind the gym, after school. The campus had been empty but for the two of them — they had stayed behind two hours, in the same place, keeping up a feverish conversation about their directionless passions. She was the most rational person he'd ever known, and he loved to listen to her. She had wanted to be a writer back then. And in the middle of a sentence that she seemed to be firing off with only half her brain — she stopped dead. A painful pause, during which she put her palms up to her temples and moved a step closer to him. So close, in fact, that his first impulse had been to step back. But he'd checked it — been proud of himself — and reached out his hands, playfully, to rest them on her shoulders. He smelled her breath, which brushed his chin like a feather. It was not unpleasant.

"I'm sorry," she had said. And again, "I'm sorry."

Her eyes were wet. He put his hands on her shoulders. "Why?" he said, softly, and

kissed either eyelid so that his lips became wet with her tears.

"What do you think about this, Frank?" she said. "See, when an athlete is on drugs, he's disqualified. A gymnast, say, or a runner. Well, what about a writer? I had this stupid vision. A miracle drug that lifts you up from the doldrums of writer's block. Would it be honest? I know if I hadn't . . ."

But she'd stopped. "What?" he said. "What?" She didn't say anything more. "The writing of drug addicts becomes repetitive and dull," he said, repeating something he had heard somewhere else, sometime before.

He put his arms around her neck, and she settled her head onto his shoulder, tired.

How long ago had that been? Five years? Six, now.

Now she stared at him over a half-eaten piece of toast with an uglier brand of disillusion than the kind they'd had as teens — an uglier brand partly because it wasn't conspiratorial.

(Every man for himself. Every woman, too.)

And partly because it wasn't at all for show.

(Oh, so you're watching me strip naked, voyeur-wise? Fine. What do I care? No more kinky little flourishes. You want the real thing? Here it is!)

"How are you, Colette?" he asked her, maliciously.

Then both of them looked away from one another. He, embarrassed, she — well, what was she?

Her voice betrayed nothing untoward.

"Tired," she said, as if to her toast.

You look it, he wanted to say. And then, and then — oh! — he did.

She looked back up at him, maybe a little surprised (but only a little), reaching for her toast, biting into it again. "Why don't you have another slice of cake?" she said as she chewed. Like a mother trying to console a whining child, only so as not to be accused of neglect. Shut up about your broken toy — here's a piece of cake.

Once again he felt outmaneuvered, but he persevered, for it was not in his nature to give up easily. If give up he must — and he was no stranger to failure — let it not be without some grand feint to cap the dolorous campaign.

"Sometimes I think you're a human icicle, Colette."

She smiled at that, and ate some more toast. She chewed slowly, and gave the appearance of thinking that statement over with great care. Pity she did not look more bovine, he might have said she was chewing her cud. To take the metaphor further — she had more stomach than heart.

When her smile dropped once again, he closed his eyes. He close his eyes to better relive that smile. Relive it as she answered; compare it to the phantom smiles that crowded his waking dreams.

"Sometimes I think you're a human combustible. But —" she added, "you have no idea how happy I am you're not senile." He opened his eyes. She was looking out the window, no longer chewing. "I mean, better excitable than impotent."

His elbow was numb from leaning on. That position had, anyway, become silly.

"I don't know what you mean," he confessed.

She shrugged and finished her toast.

Then he did something very juvenile — transparently, as one who didn't know the game well enough to be subtle.

He took the coffee – by now as cool as she,
he imagined – and poured it out. Not into her
lap, but onto her plate. The crumbs floated to
the top, danced there as he poured and poured.
Down a cascade off the edge of the plate they
fell, swirled like detritus in a river of pale
murk that progressed down the table, only to
drop off it in an aromatic estuary – one stream
softly pattering the floor and another her
knees.

“You’ve dirtied my bathrobe,” she said,
for a few square inches of fabric now caught
slick and damp.

And so he had.

STEPHANIE SOLIS

Against

Teeth scratched each other.
I wrung my moist, engorged hands, as though
Expecting to twist water out of them
Like a laundress
Until finally, in defeat,
Streams of sweat forced themselves
Out against the dams
Of skin
And logic.

JOSEPH MATTSON

Slam Drunk Superstar

Just remember when the sky folds
and the empty hand of god
palms your skull like a
basketball,
with orange lights fading off in some
far, familiar distance,
with the memory of hot flowers and
black sunshine in your heart,
if you’ve made up the bed of regret
like you’ve made up the bed after a
woman whose legs are the legs that
make hercules weep, slinky as the
lips of heaven and so tender to touch
laying out your mistakes like a
hand full of thirty-eyed jacks,
then heel to the hunger
& if you’re still alive
and full of any kind of laughter
brother that’s done, that’s strength
you have there the right to go chase
silver jackasses into music like
tiny skies over
guatemala
even an ocean of dirty bathwater can
claim a certain serenity with the face of
six hundred blooming seahorses.

Reproductive Blues

When optimism fails, where should I seek
the strength, integrity to carry on?
You know that in the past I've not been meek
and also that this battle has been long.

My bones and muscles yearn to bear the load
that has been borne a thousand times before.
"Xs and Ys, combine with speed!" I goad
while wondering if I really should implore.

You ask me why the crack moms have such luck
at having babies while we struggle on.
I have no answer for your almond eyes,
but we both know we'll try again at dawn.

Piñata

Loaded with Valentine's candies
Mints, chocolates, those little hearts
That say "be mine" and "page me"
It loomed overhead
Like a pink supergiant
Ready to go nova.

Between tequila shots
The rest of us would
Blindly swing and miss,
Yell and laugh.
Arms folded, you stood aside
Like John the Baptist
Sulking with his honey and locusts.

If you had wielded that baton
Like the shining knight you image
You might have struck
The belly of a pink dragon
And from its wound
Hear scores of hearts
Just like mine
Pour out for you.

**Winner of 2003 Creative Writing Contest
Best Essay**

HORTENSIA CHU

Sweet Bread

At last the dough has risen, after some kneading and waiting. A light punch I give to the 5 lb. mass makes it shrink a bit, and as it breathes back, a subtle sweetness fills the air.

I have, for as long as I can remember, found this scent comforting. The humble blending of yeast, warm water, sugar, flour, egg whites, shortening, and a little bit of milk makes for a delicately fragrant dough, the dough for *tian bao*. *Tian* means sweet in Chinese, and *bao* means bread. In this case they are buns, soft and round, stuffed with ground lotus seed which has been stirred and cooked patiently on a hot wok with melted yellow rock sugar until it glistens golden. My oldest daughter is coming over this afternoon to spend Chinese New Year with me. *Tian bao* is one of her favorite things, and she could very easily buy them at any Chinese bakery. At the rate my westernized daughter is going, always so busy, that's probably what she'll do the day I stop making them. For now while I still can, I make *tian bao*, better than any store bought, homemade and real.

I break the cream colored dough in small balls and line them on my wooden board. It yields about 40 balls for *tian bao*. Next, with a rolling pin I flatten the first dough ball into a patty about 4" wide. While holding the patty on my left palm I place a solid spoonful of the sweetened lotus seed on its middle, pick up the edges and with a slight twist and crimp, I seal

the bun. I turn the bun upside down and place it on a square piece of wax paper. I will repeat this process with the rest of the dough balls.

As I labor over with the rolling pin I feel an awkward pain on my shoulders. "Slow down," I hear in my head. I am indeed rushing now, trying to finish before the dough sours.

"Slow down, you can't rush *tian bao*." This time it is my mother's hushed voice I hear in my head. I stop rolling the dough as if to hear better what she may say next. But I hear nothing. She's been gone for over twenty years, my dear a-mah, and my heart still sinks thinking of her, but this is not the first time she speaks to me when I grow impatient in the kitchen.

My mother was born in southern China, in the province of Chickay, near Guangzhou. No birth certificates were issued in her village of peasants so I was never able to find out her exact birthday. I was told she was born on a full moon night, the one preceding the harvest moon, which falls around August in the western calendar. The year, about 1890. She was a Hakka, a descendant of one of the most celebrated farming people in China. Hakka people were known to be hardworking farmers and herders, to be a matriarchal society, since during most of the history of China, many Hakka men were recruited to go to the imperial wars, including my father. My mother looked like a woman who could do the work of a man. She was quite tall and large boned and could outwalk my much shorter father, on the steep mountains; she could outdo other farmers, finding the thickest and best burning firewood out of the pine and bamboo forests, carrying the sturdy burden on her back and still walk tall; she could grow the most grains in her rice paddy even during inclement weather. She wore pants cropped at the calves with wide seats that later I grew to

associate with peasants. There was something about how her bony ankles showed that made her bare feet look so much bigger, feet that were meant to tread on untamed soil. She wore rough cotton jackets with low mandarin collars and cloth buttons that she'd cinch at the waist with a belt of the same color and material. One thing my peasant mother was proud of was how she was able to always look clean and neat. Her night black hair was pulled to a bun with no unruly strands running loose, her clothes humble yet smelling of fresh jasmine and rain water, unlike the other farmers who'd come home looking and smelling like they'd rolled around with the cattle or fallen into the muddy water of the rice fields.

Hard work and hard life was the credo she was given and she accepted it. As a small child I thought the time she and I spent in the fields spreading seeds, in the barn feeding the demanding piglets, over the ashen stove pit, the cold river wash, were play time, were fun things. I was yet to understand why my mother's big hands were often bleeding and calloused, why she looked older than her age. There were already three other children when I was born and one adopted cousin, all raised mostly by my mother. Because my mother's presence filled my every day life, whereas my father's was intermittent, I didn't worry much when he'd leave. Yet she must have worried about him and worried in quiet.

Although my mother left the house at dawn for the fields and came back past sunset, she managed to prepare us a hot dinner every night. *Bai Fan*, hot steaming fluffy rice; *choy ton*, a soup made with field vegetables like turnip or mustard greens in clear broth with ginger and scallions for the summer; kabocha squash or green winter melon soup for cold days; *ham ng*, some kind of salted fish since the catch would vary with the season, our favorite being mack-

erel; thick tofu squares stuffed with nibbles of shrimp and pickled radishes. . . . The array of these hot simple foods brought smiles, chatter, and swift clicking of chopsticks and rice bowls hollowing. A-mah, mother, was home after all.

We rarely had sugary treats at home, after all the meals were meant to satisfy any hunger. Yet, my siblings and I were creative and resourceful in satisfying our sweet tooth, looking up to the hummingbirds for inspiration and direction: whatever those needle-like beaks would aim for we would taste too. And so right they were, having led us to flowers with the most heavenly honey in their pistiles and petals that we could chew into gum balls; and delicacies like blackberries, longan, kumquat and red dates. . . . We would laugh out loud with deep stained teeth and tongues, though sometimes even the birds seemed to have a streak for fooling us, for we also learned about tart and tearful sour flavors.

My mother would surprise us every now and then with the sale of a fattened pig or a good load of rice or red beans or firewood. She would then bring home some rare and precious traded goods. A few ounces of rock candy sugar, some for cooking and some for a special birthday present. Dusty sacks of flour, large brown speckled eggs resting on a straw box, chunky cubes of lard wrapped in corn husks announced to us the promise and happiness of eating tian bao. And often this good fortune coincided with the advent of the Chinese New Year.

This holiday was welcomed with much fanfare in our small village, beginning with the tending of the home. Thatched roofs were swept with straw brooms, doorways and floors were scrubbed with hot water and vinegar, broken paper window coverings would be replaced with new diaphanous rice paper. Prayer shrines in every home would get freshened up. Sad, droopy,

half burnt incense sticks were replaced by bright fuchsia colored ones, three times the thickness and length of the ones used during the rest of the year. The Buddha statue presiding in the shrine would be dressed by the children with a necklace, and tiny field flowers strung with silk thread saved in the sewing box. The bowl of offerings would get filled with bright reddish mandarins with stems and leaves still attached. Characters signifying the best of wishes for the New Year would be painted with black ink on red paper scrolls and hung at the entrance door and throughout each home: one to bring abundance everyday to the hearth, another one for success at all ten thousand endeavors in life, one for health and peace in the home.

But the offerings and the red scrolls would not satisfy the Buddha in our home, we used to say to our mother. He needed *tian bao*. And so, teased by her children, my mother would find herself late one night making the dough, grinding the lotus seeds for the sweet filling, cutting the bamboo leaves into squares with my great grandfather's scissors. I'd hear from under my pink quilt all the sounds in the kitchen. I'd inhale the fragrance of the sweet scented dough, of the heated wok sizzling with brown sugar and lard, and smile satisfied. Hours later, by dawn, inside our home a soft cloud of steam would hang, the steam coming from the deep pot with the bamboo trays covered with stuffed dough balls, hot water at the bottom bubbling away while the buns turned white, soft and plump. On this day we'd skip our typical breakfast of *jok* (porridge) and *yeou tiao* (fried bread) and the best jasmine flowers and leaves would be brewed into several pots of tea. The *tian bao* trays would cover our big round rosewood table. Each bao bore a cherry blossom stamp that my mother had applied with a tiny carved chop, dipped in red homemade food color. The

tian bao sat in all their glory, still puffing away small clouds of steam and sweetness, offering such a sight and feeling of abundance to our home. Buddha was certainly pleased.

To eat the *tian bao* I'd peel the hot bun off the square piece of bamboo leaf and holding it with all my small fingers, I'd ponder at how wonderful it'd be to rest my head on that to sleep, were that to be a pillow. Then I'd breathe in the simple yet complex aroma of the bao before taking the first bite. The bao was fragrant, its bread-like outside soft and moist, and had just the right hint of sweetness and saltiness, and I loved the nutty texture of the lotus seed filling. It was a food to be patient with because the nuances stirred in the mouth and all the senses in between each bite were so unique. What I was tasting was my mother's love, patience and tenderness.

Now, after all these years far away from my past and my country, I can conjure up memories of my mother's cooking and with every familiar dish, a story. With her food she told us feelings and thoughts words could not. Though her life had been difficult, her spirit displayed no hardness, no bitterness, no wishing for what she didn't have. I think of my daughter and I wonder if when she bites into the bao I am making she'll feel welcomed, cared for.

I go back to my laboring with the rolling pin and the dough and, yes, to do this right, I must slow down. Like my mother said, *You can't rush tian bao*.

LISA KELLY

Eugene Carriere's Mother's Kiss

All is obscured
in the biting smoke
of memory, mother
save this:

Your hair, a web of
lemon and rosemary;
your hands,
gnarled from kneading
yet cool to the touch;
your eyes,
resolute yet resigned,
like a broken stallion
who loves his master
too much to act up again.

At the corner bakery,
I order bread with rosemary,
not to eat it,
but to hold it
in my own
weak hands.

AMANDA-FAYE JIMENEZ

Ceramic Cow

When i opened the door
the chill came out
wafted scents of
leftover spanish rice,
cold hotdogs, jam.
a ceramic cow,
its spotted belly
full and low
sat there useless and
smugly out of place
with its light blue bow,
so middle-american,
in my grandma's
mexican fridge.
i didn't know what it was
until it was gone—
remembered the
vents on its back,
and white powdery
residue—
the baking soda inside was
supposed to absord odors
of celery sticks, pinto beans,
breakfast links.
but it never worked
because those smells today
take me back there,
to when we were eye-level,
the cow and i.
and i resented it.

STEPHANIE BREWER

Money from the Bank Robbery

Where could it be?
Perhaps in grandma's old emerald pendant
Did you hear about her?
She died of old gut sickness and gluttony
We are moving towards self-government now
Nell loves me
It would have been perfect
She's my clone

I see people I be in bad movies
Always bad "B"
Antacid gobbling strangers always share secrets
Tomorrow's calling blue waves of bacon grease
It's a hunch that loyalty stems from ignorance
But we cast no dispersions here
Mix Jesus and whine
Stir vigorously
My bones are soft
Just like Lana Turner's

I put my favorite lines in a jar
With formaldehyde and my dead skin
Don't touch me when my eyes are opaque
Just let me shed
If you could see anything, what would you do?
I would learn to close my eyes
I know what it's like to keep a secret.

ANTHONY CASTRO

Dad's TV

When my dad lost his job,
He used to like to watch
Those smart TV shows.
Like Jeopardy.
He made us watch with him
-Well it was his TV-
He needed to prove
His intelligence to us,
He was very insecure that way.
We waited for clever commercials,
Not knowing the capital of Uruguay.

PETER VARVEL

Supplement

Jaden reached past his electric shaver and grabbed a safety razor out of the medicine cabinet. Wiping the shower steam off of the mirror he automatically checked the short, dark spikes of his wet hair in the reflection. Without foam, he took deliberate care in scraping away the black stubble, especially along the jaw line beneath each cheekbone. He rinsed out the razor under the faucet and tapped it against the inside of the sink. The aftershave balm was expensive, but it had a very mild scent and was practically tasteless.

A tinny melody beeped in the bedroom.

Jaden grabbed his wireless phone and checked the caller ID display before answering.

"Hi, Harold."

"Do you know where you're going?"

"Yeah, I was there last month."

"Call me when you're done." Harold hung up without saying goodbye. Jaden chuckled. Harold was always anxious for his percentage. Jaden didn't mind. Harold was a reassuring type, in a grandfatherly way.

Jaden remembered the motel, from the month before. He had seen a father and son across the street. The boy had been on a blue bicycle, training wheels angled up a couple of inches off the ground.

"Balance your weight in the middle," the father had instructed, gripping the back of the bike. "If you get scared, just lean to one side and the training wheels will catch you."

The boy had fretted. "They're too high up! If I lean I'll fall." The boy was about seven, Jaden had thought.

"I won't let you fall," Jaden remembered the father assuring. "I'll only let go when I see that you're balanced. If you start to lean to one side, I'll grab the back of the bike again. You'll be okay."

That had been on a Thursday. Jaden remembered that he had felt envious of the boy because his father was home on a weekday.

He easily found the motel, again. The sidewalk across the street was empty when he pulled into the parking lot and turned off the ignition. He stayed seated in the car. You don't have to do this, Jaden told himself. You don't have to keep doing this. You can always cancel the appointment. Harold says it's better to cancel if it ever doesn't feel safe. You have an easy out. Tips have been good at the restaurant, he thought. But I need to do more than just keep my head above water. I want to

be ahead of the game. Think about your bills, your expenses, he reminded himself. That always settled the matter.

The smoker's cliché ran through his mind again. "I can quit anytime I want."

As he got out of the car, Jaden saw the boy walking his blue bicycle around the corner. The boy was alone. The training wheels were gone. Jaden watched the boy throw a leg over the bike and pedal a few feet, wobbling, before he jumped off again, still gripping the handlebars. Jaden turned and climbed the stairs to the second story, to room 24. The doors at this motel were a hideous neon orange. Safety orange. The door opened almost immediately after he knocked.

"Jaden?"

"Yeah." He forced a smile.

"Come in. I'm . . . John." The client offered his hand.

Jaden shook it and took a closer look. "Nice to meet you, John."

Not bad, he thought. Probably in his late forties, early fifties, maybe. More dark hair than gray. Kind, brown eyes, a little sad looking. A gold band on the left hand.

"You can put your clothes on that chair," the client said, gesturing. "The money's there."

Jaden grabbed the bills, counted them quickly and stuffed them into his front pocket before taking his shirt off. Light fixtures shone warmly on either side of the reflection of his bare torso, in the room's vanity mirror. Near the door, afternoon sunlight spilled in past the edges of closed curtains hanging above the floor-level air conditioner.

Outside, there was a faint metallic crash of a bicycle spilling on the sidewalk. Jaden heard the boy cry out. He had an impulse to rush out and help the boy up, to comfort him, know-

ing he was alone. But the client had already grabbed Jaden's hand and pulled him in close. He was nuzzling Jaden's face, fondling his crotch.

Great, Jaden thought sarcastically, old-man-smell. The stale smell of tobacco smoke on the skin, or last night's alcohol, combined with the distinct body odor exclusive to older men. Not on all of them, but definitely on this one, unfortunately.

The client's breathing became heavier, gustier. "You have such smooth skin," he gushed.

"Mm," Jaden replied vaguely, thinking that he was told that line almost every time.

He tried not to worry about the boy. He was probably okay. It didn't matter, really, as long as he was being touched. It was better than nothing.

M. HAYES

Heist

Tense with the idea
but wanting to impress.

She was older,
from another state
where distant
cousins come from.
Wasn't sure
if I liked her much,
if at all.

The crime scene,
a local drug store.

She was a natural. Giggled,
sprayed me
with cheap perfume,
as I sweated through
my tube socks.

"Your turn!"

She already had two eyeliners,
a candy bar, and a bottle
of nail-polish in the deep
pockets of her jeans.

I reached a hot hand out,
grabbed the closest thing,
pushed it upward with my tallest
finger into my sleeve.

The giddy feeling of getting away
with it faded, like a two dollar tube
of coral lipstick—
I never wore that shade again—
and I was sure
I didn't like my cousin much,
if at all.

**Winner of 2003 Creative Writing Contest
Best Poem**

STEVE SAUCEDO

**When We Had the Playground
to Ourselves**

1.

All low alleys look the same—
trash bubbles out of can, pavement is stained,
engine blocks are hollow, all metal is rust.
This was the channel we traveled on our way
to the empty playground on Mott, my friend & I.
We would glide by as children do, and voices,
sounds, & music would rise & fall in our ears.
The dogs looked like leopards; spots composed
of dirt;
they sniffed the insides of paper bags, and,
sometimes,
their heads would get stuck and we'd laugh—
but, poor dog, for all he knew the darkness in the
bag could've been the end of the world;
no wonder he bucked and whipped like a crazy horse.
And no matter how hard we'd fling a stone
the crows would always fly away just in the nick.

2.

Teeter-totters are an archaic playground ride—
replaced by orange plastic slides engineered so as
not to conduct heat, so as not to burn kids in
shorts.
The place on Mott had all the old-time, danger fun.
Scraped knees & shaved elbows & once I got a
bump on my head it looked like a smooth walnut.

The swings needed oil, so the piercing squeaking of
metal friction twined with the glee of our laughs
as we swung. We pretended we were the legs of
a robot.

The mellow sun slugged along on its arch,
marking time—
we mixed sandbox sand & water to great results:
mini-fragile ramparts we cast from a bucket mold—
The sun was slowly pouncing on the skyscrapers to
the west, flooding pink on the skyline—
it was time to head home.

3.

After candy rings, sour rocks, & ice-cream
sandwiches,
We scuttled down 1st. Nighttime waits, wily,
on the other
side of the planet all day to attack; to
stifle good &
to percolate evil in hearts; night was coming soon;
I knew this because the lights in Isaac's shoes
were bright now—Isaac was my friend.
We passed by a trash heap haphazardly.
We walked by a lime-hued house with a black
iron fence.
"That's where my dad died," Isaac said.
Immediately,
I thought, *what a funny place to die: the sidewalk,*
which was where he pointed. "He was shot,"
he muttered.
I asked who shot him & he said, "Some guy, I
don't know."
It wasn't until we reached his house and said
goodbyes,
when left alone, on the streets, with night
shooing day,
crickets harking the bald men from their porches to

the corners, that thoughts started flushing my mind.
They were kid thoughts, about death. You could
file them next to *beasts under the bed &*

killer toys—

scary and ominous thoughts; helpless feelings.
A gulp burrowed down my throat.
I ran home and hid.

4.

In cotton night-clothes, I climbed into bed aware
of the faint light entering my window—
I did not know the source. Somewhere outside
is a man who killed my friend's dad, I thought,
he could be anywhere, creeping along tight alleys
or staring at his next victim, & there could

be others

like him too—following his lead or searing
their own ugly path.

I pictured busy molecules bumping into each other—
Mr. Rogers had shown me this earlier today on TV.
I saw blood. I recalled the pensive look that
was always on

Isaac's face, and he was always so quiet,
maybe he was thinking

of his dad all that time; I would. I wondered
what was in

the sewers; we tried to open a manhole the
other day, it was too heavy.

*Do killers make wishes and blow out candles on
their birthdays?;*

*do they relive the moments they ended others'
lives in their minds?*

I remembered one time I kicked Isaac in the
stomach because

he said I had a big head, and he fell to the
floor & cried; to this day

I have never harbored a sharper guilt than that.

These were just the sort of strange thoughts
I always got seconds before falling asleep.

LISA KELLY

Los Angeles by Train

Juan Hernandez,
weary at the dusk of another Wednesday,
waits.
Orange vest, blue sanitation cart.
Rumbling traffic cuts through the evening air.
A tall man strolls by carrying a carved wooden
shelf.
The train rattles into the station.

How much of our lives do we spend waiting?

J. Z. Wayne,
swimming in the music on his silver walkman,
jams.
Shiny black sweatsuit, pulled-down cap.
He flies by streets with red lights flashing,
but doesn't even look out the window.
Eyes shut, he grooves to the beat
as a grandmother holding her baby grandson
walks by.
J. Z. doesn't see them.

Does anyone on this train have a gun?

Layla Fonseca,

drowning in the memory of a lover's tryst,
floats.
She doesn't hear the rattle of metal against
tracks,
remembering instead her lover's breath, close
against her chest.
An older black man, a security guard,
ambles past with a cardboard box, held gingerly.

What's in the box: a kitten?

Jaimie Travers,
brain fried by coke,
fidgets.
He pulls at a thread on his faded blue jacket,
glancing left, right, back, and front.
The smiling-eyed grandmother and her curly-
haired grandson
laugh nearby.
The boy is transfixed by the white lights of
the freeway.
Jaimie only winces.

Few can resist a cute baby.

Anna Rizzini,
dead beat in the black-licorice evening,
dreams.
She gazes at the capuccino poster:
Tome un segunda taza.
Have another cup: Late Night Metro Rail.
But food, drink, gum, and feet on the seats
are all forbidden.
A voice comes over the fuzzy speakers:
"This stop is Mission."

A world without cars: living on train time.

Teddy Neighbors,

sober for 27 days,
preaches:
Life is in session.
You gotta have faith.
You gotta have hope.
Keep a godful spirit.
Teddy thought he was heading to Hollywood,
but stopped in Pasadena.
His audience feigns interest.

I find an abandoned ticket: ONE WAY.

Carlos Herrera,
57 years collected in the wrinkles under his eyes,
ponders.
Will Letty still be angry at him?
Will little Carlos be awake?
Did Mama go to the doctor?
Do they have enough money left to pay rent?
Lunch bab propped on his knee,
there is more in his silence than in all of
Teddy's preaching.
Carlos speaks through the veins in his arms,
the dirt under his fingernails,
the stubble on his chin.
"All that and a bag of chips," says Teddy,
but Carlos doesn't hear him.

How long would I have to stare before you noticed?

Luisa Montega,
notebooks in hand, lip liner glowing,
listens.
"You have a lot of confidence," Teddy says to her.
The friendly security guard lets her look
inside the box.
She smiles, then finally, she speaks:
"I knew a guy who took photos of everything,
but he never developed the film."

The baby laughs, the train groans into the station,
and teddy wishes he'd asked for Luisa's number.

Two dark-skinned, shiny-haired kids
pile in with their panting father.
They all wear bright yellow t-shirts.

Isn't it past their bedtime?

I turn over the abandoned ticket,
scribble a message on it,
and leave it for the next passenger.
As the doors begin to close,
I slip out into the dank and steamy station.

Coordenadas

I have just
realized
I am in a different latitude
from my homeland,
the language of this country,
is incomprehensible the names of
the streets and avenues
unpronounceable
the parks
overflow with the poor,
thousands of shadows
roving to the streets
without a safe shelter,
discrimination
is limitless,
individualism
is the law
governing survival,
the winters are long and severe,
hunger mortars
the bones of the majority
called a minority,
still I tremble
when I think of returning
to El Salvador,
only yesterday
I realized this,
yet I remain
here

Ode to America

America sells America
 Fear
 it consumes the country
 and America sells consumerism
 to fill the need to feel
 But filler doesn't feel real
 so America stays searching for substance to
 sustain

This city belongs to cars and buildings
 cell phones and credit cards
 fast food and fashion statements
 pollution and power
 corporations and their corruption
 money and movies
 reality TV and people
 to want to be

Materialism is a virtue here
 and I have become just another number to fill
 a statistic

So I've decided what to do

America I'm going to sue you
 for being too full

Broken

Nothing seems to work anymore in this grand
 old house. I grew up here, on this 1920s
 estate. And she was once well attended,
 serene, and beautiful.

Now, her surface cracked, her color worn, her
 trim appears coarse and pitted. Weathered red.
 Spanish tiles cling to her wide expanse of
 rooftop. A battle against time. Her once
 vibrant gardens lie overgrown and brown. Only
 the strongest species of plant has survived.
 Those not needing human care.

There has been no real mistress of this house
 for a very long time.

Inside, the house herself and all her attending
 appliances are close to capitulation. The range
 top survives with 3 out of 4 of her burners
 extinguished. The dryer barely exudes enough
 warmth to dry her clothes. The refrigerator
 emits a permanent low moan. Neglected for
 years.

Upstairs, in the master bathroom, a toilet
 stopped functioning. No one remembers when.
 She now squats cold and empty, devoid of fluids.
 The enormous tiled shower proves equally impo-
 tent. Her white porcelain "hot" and "cold"
 knobs, age-old counterparts, have long been
 stripped of their duty. They lie amputated and
 apart, forgotten on a chair in the corner.

Then there is the Broken Room. When it was my
 bedroom, it vibrated with possibility. Ringing

the walls hung those dreamy, optimistic posters of wide-eyed, early '70s youth. Indian print tapestries doubled as winged magic carpets while embroidered pillows with tiny mirrors illuminated the refractive future. The world poured in through the wide, balcony doors—always open.

Now, the Broken Room sits closed, airless, immobile. The epitome of all that is unable to be fixed. Just inside lie chairs lacking legs, haplessly limping. And headless lamps, hopelessly listing. A television whose insides don't quite work right. A silent, frozen-up old sewing machine. Worn rotary telephones that can no longer sing.

Deep inside, a world lies buried. On tiered carts sit piles of silvery-tubed oil paints. Rough wood palettes and smooth-handled palette knives. Cans and cans of ready, graduated, sable brushes. Embossed metal containers holding turpentine and linseed oil. Clean rags and empty, nested tins. A drying rack, arms fixed and extended. A patient old easel. And stacked all along the perimeter are canvases. Huge, stretched canvases. Many completed. Many never to be realized. All gathering dust. And all facing the wall.

But the eye is drawn to the overlay. Overwhelming in glaring, Day-Glo plastic colors lie upended basins, bowls, and buckets. Pepto-Bismol pink, glaring vomit green, pee yellow. Flimsy, shallow bedpans. Lopsided water pitchers with garishly contrasting, spill-proof, covered cups. And much white—that color devoid of color. Rolls and rolls and rolls of thin-veined gauze. White papered straws, bandages, and antiseptic wipes. Screw-top specimen jars. Long discarded instructions. And more prescription bottles than imaginable. All opaque.

To the side, a battered umbrella stand rests, stuffed full of canes. Weighed down with knee-high black metal braces, barely scuffed orthopedic oxfords lean against each other. Hideously shiny aluminum walkers proselytize false hope. And finally, a few older model wheelchairs collapse together in a corner.

There has been no real mistress of this house for a very long time. I was 17 years old when my mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It's been close to thirty years now.

My mother's shadowy existence leaves many roles vacant. No lady of the manor. No mother or grandmother. No partner for my exhausted father in his "golden years." No wife. No lover. No help. Instead, there is need. Constant, debilitating, numbing need.

My mother's hands don't work very well anymore. She can barely lift to her lips the weightless, plastic utensils she now must use. We eat in the kitchen. Her once spacious dining room resembles a space-age jungle gym. All sorts of immense metal contraptions compete for attention in this room that now beds my parents. Separately.

We are told that we are so lucky. Hers is the slowly progressing form of the disease.

My mother's acclaimed paintings hang on every wall of my parents' home. But she no longer sees most of them. Her motorized wheelchair travels a repeated path of perhaps 50 feet. Two rooms out of 19. The rest does not really matter. After all, a house can always be repaired, appliances replaced, and gardens renewed.

Ripe

Smooth sailing; knowingly
Layer upon layer
Of exposed, leathered skin
From summer sun.

His eyes blazing hazel
His hair screaming white

The smell of sea sweat
Beading from his skin
Rolling down the dark
Of his young shoulders

Dripping to the sand
Where my feet
Bury themselves
In an unmentionable bliss

Each grain finely rounded
To the percetion
Of the wearer
Hoping to be carried away shortly.

I stare upward into the sun
And the only thing that saves my sight
Is his ripe body.

For You, Tonight

Everything is right. The way she slumps
topless on the hardwood floor in the hall
pale and bare, like those sterile walls . . .
the *passion* in her moans when we dry-hump;
The way she puts ice in her White Zinfandel
which is really pink, like the hue of her lips
even the slight tilt of her mal-aligned hips
is right. She whispers, "You're so beautiful . . ."
in mid-moan; I whisper, "God, so are you"
just low enough so that she doesn't hear.

The Morning After

The sun shines
through open windows,
Panic about the morning after
looms in strange places,
like the marriage bed.
After committing crimes and misdemeanors
through the midnight moon.

In Response to Returning:

If you were many men,
You'd be some name
Easier to forget than the last,
Some impassive grunt
Another stain on the duvet

If you were many men
You wouldn't have to find me
Most nights
Nor kidnap me to get some
Time all to yourself

If you were many men
I wouldn't call
More than once a week
You couldn't wear my resentment
Like a coveted prize

If you were many men
I wouldn't ever find my way home
You wouldn't be waiting
When the bars close
For me to stumble up the stairs

If you were many men
I wouldn't be here
Would I?

Mr. RTD

I took the usual bus to school, making a stop at the mall. English class sucked, and I didn't want to go. Pathetic losers like me shuffled their way on the bus. Young punks and old farts came in with various clothes and various smells. I felt older than my 22 years, and I was so happy the bus was crowded.

I sighed loudly in disgust and looked out the window. Standing out like a sore thumb from the tired masses was a scrawny, nervous looking white guy. His face was pale and clammy, his greasy jet-black hair was parted to the side. The vintage 1970s brown suit he wore was two sizes too large.

Something about him made me uncomfortable. Maybe it was the way he paced back and forth at the bus stop. Maybe his bus was late. Clutching his tan briefcase tightly, the knuckles on his right hand were white. He constantly checked his watch.

I looked closer. The gold nametag on his left lapel was titled "Mr. RTD."

He stared at me blankly. I looked at him stupidly. My bus took off, leaving him alone at the stop.

For the rest of the week, I couldn't stop thinking about him. Who was he? Why was he named "Mr. RTD"? Was it the name of the bus system, or his initials? What was he carrying in that briefcase? I rode various bus routes that week to look for him, since I had no life beyond school. He wasn't around.

The next week, my hopes were fading when I saw him again. I was in the same bus at the same time as before. He boarded the bus.

I was nervous as he sat in front of me. Holding his briefcase tightly to his chest, he stared blankly out the window. Within a few minutes, he relaxed and let the briefcase slide onto his lap. He tapped it lightly, his nails bitten to the bone. I waited anxiously for him to open the case, and after two bus stops, he did. I made sure he didn't know I was peeking over his shoulder.

He had several hundred bus schedules. They were all he carried in it. My jaw dropped from the impressive amount as he adjusted the contents. The schedules were arranged in numerical order. Four columns were on the top, and four columns on the bottom. Starting at schedule #1, it ended at #497. Meticulously choosing a schedule, he carefully opened the route we were on—the 256. The schedule, like all the others, was brand new. Looking at the paper, he placed his finger on a time and checked his watch.

"It's on time," he mumbled. Two bus stops later, he departed.

That day and the rest of the week, all I could think about was Mr. RTD. What was wrong with this guy? I knew he was strange when I first saw him. How could he have so many schedules? He probably had a car.

That Saturday, my cousin and I went to the mall to hang out and escape the heat. We got ice cream and sat down.

Ten minutes later, Mr. RTD passed by. I stopped my conversation in mid-sentence and stared at him.

"What's wrong?" my cousin said. "It looks like you just saw a ghost."

"No, it's worse than that. It's Mr. RTD!"

We followed him, walking ten paces behind so he wouldn't know he was being followed. He walked into the Waldenbooks and browsed through the magazine rack at the store's entrance. We

hesitated, standing 20 feet away. I held on to my cousin's shirt tightly.

"Is that the loony toon you've been telling me about?" I nodded. "I don't believe you."

"I told you the truth. That's him. He has hundreds of schedules in his briefcase."

My cousin decided to do something very stupid.

"HEY, Mr. RTD!"

Mr. RTD spun around and glared at us. He slammed the magazine against the rack and walked towards us.

"Oh my God!" I grabbed my cousin's arm and ran like hell out of the mall. It took us half an hour to get the courage to take the bus home. We were afraid he was on the route we wanted.

A month later, I returned to the mall. I was eating alone at the food court when I saw Mr. RTD walking towards me, wearing the same suit and nametag. I choked on my hamburger. He sat across from me and placed his briefcase on the table.

"I suppose you're wondering why I was upset the last time we saw each other." His voice was soft but shaky. He rested his hands on the briefcase, keeping his eyes on it. "You see, I'm proud that I am Mr. RTD. I provide a service to those who need bus information. Although no one has asked me for help, I am always on call, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. So I was disappointed when that boy you were with yelled at me."

He opened his briefcase and took a bundle of schedules tied with a rubber band. Closing the case, he put the bundle on the table, placed his left hand on it, and raised his right hand.

"But I swear, I would have not harmed you. I have dedicated my life to the betterment of mankind, and I shall always do so." He lowered

his hand and smiled at me. "How many people can say that?

"Not many." I felt strangely relieved.

"I could tell you were impressed by my schedules as we rode the 256."

I gasped. "You knew I was looking at you?"

"Yes." His voice was hypnotic as he took my hand. His skin was warm and soft. "I knew I would see you again. I could tell you were different from other people.

"How?"

"From your schedules."

I looked down to see several bundles of schedules had fallen out of my open backpack, and the other 200 schedules were in plain sight. Mr. RTD laughed softly. His gray eyes twinkled under the fluorescent lights.

It has been a glorious year since I first met Mr. RTD. We live across the street from the downtown RTD main office. Whenever he rides the bus, I ride alongside him. My pink suitcase is filled with schedules, and I wear a nametag labeled "Mrs. RTD."

ANTHONY CASTRO

You Make Masturbation Fun Again

Like rolling dice.

I am wet with a dry thought,
Sweet with a short beginning

With You,
Sex is sexy, Love is lovely.
The uncut kiss, the brutal slit.

The laugh of an easy tit.

You make it fun again

Like rolling dice.

LISA KELLY

Skechers

My husband hates my tennis shoes—they make him scream and run. But all my trendy hip-hop friends think they're a lot of fun.

"I thought that you liked Skechers, dear," I innocently said.
"Besides, it was a two for one."
He looked at them with dread.

The black and white, the silver stripe, the chunky, doughy base offended his aesthetic sense and took up too much space.

"Wear what you like, my darling wife—your style's your own," he said. Then he unlaced my tennis shoes and took me straight to bed.

My Sugar

Says he will have to let me go
If I gain any more weight.

I almost choked on my diet pill.
(back to eating flavored ice cubes)

The burden of being young and beautiful
Is having to stay that way.

I listen to him repeat himself.

Sitting on a half read fitness book,
Staring at my unused spoon and fork.

Cheating Becomes the Mummy

It wasn't your rituals at the Fountain of
Youth Gym,
Blood extracted drop by drop . . .

It wasn't your midday showering,
Smell of lies resisting anointment . . .

It wasn't your passive embalming,
80 proof alcohol . . .

It wasn't your inert responses,
Atrophy muffling all recall . . .

It wasn't your imperceptible shrinking,
Death mask tightening inch by inch . . .

It wasn't your shrouded consummations,
Dust begat dust begat dust . . .

It was your mortality
-fleetingly cheated-
Your desperate disembowelment of fear.

Forgive Me

I sneezed
Blood sprayed from my
Sinuses
Please forgive me
I looked for familiarity in a vice
And I wished every person I could touch
Would feel like you under my fingerprints

That old vice, burned the empathy
After a few drinks
He sounded like you
Yes, I did fill up on his words
Until my throat was swollen with
Fake laughter

Forgive me, I woke up this morning
And untangled myself from strange sheets
And when I sneezed
Blood came out

You've got your morals
You've got your Norman Rockwell home
You've had your exotic lovers
In every shade

I have those dirty sheets
I have those forgotten numbers
I have those familiar vices
That and the migraines you give me

Josephine's Earrings

She isn't anything much, some would say.
Then again, I never put too much faith in
THEM. And I know that it isn't romantic to
some, but I'm done with fireworks. I've burnt
my hands too many times. Those butterflies peo-
ple talk about, I've had them plenty of times,
but they just feel like queasiness to me. See,
what I mean is I just want a soft place to fall.
It's close enough to love, could just be. My
baby, she isn't anything like a love song on the
radio. She isn't sweet as honey. Not perfect,
flawless, stunning. She's just a bit mean, her
ass a bit wide. She's not hot, but warm. So
warm. She ain't brilliant, but I'll tell you,
she sure is cunning; she's caught me for a lit-
tle while. For however long it lasts, doesn't
much matter anymore. I've learned the value of
now, quality over quantity. You know, there
were times before when some beautiful girlwom-
beast would make me half-crazy, if I were lucky!
If I wasn't lucky, I was 100% mad. I'm talking
purple mad. Yeah, you know the routine: up all
night, running circles round the rug, passing
out with a bottle in your hand. Why is she doing
this to me, who's she with, where's she been? I
wondered on those long nights, of pulling out my
hair, how long it would take before I was found
out to be a fraud. Turning myself inside out,
just to see which side she liked best. Trying,
trying, trying. I don't need magic, pyrotech-
nics, or silly scenes anymore. I'll take some
kindness with smooth edges instead. No more
trumpets or crashing cymbals. Just the tiny
tinkling of Josephine's earrings.

STEPHANIE BREWER

Things Fly Around My Head Sometimes

Anxious is like noxious, but different somehow
The bloody birds are within earshot
I must whisper as not to offend their plumage
They aren't afraid of my different somehow
Breadcrumbs on concrete pass the time
Before execution
Their sharp metal beaks assure me of my inadequacy
But I shrug them off
They are only birds, right?
My tongue is so far in cheek that I can taste
 my own disappointment
I must build a nest, they told me
But I shrug them off
They are only birds, right?

BEAN

I Guess

i threw my head into the fireplace
the mattress exploded
birds invaded through the window
they picked at my scalp
and tongue

the birds were
communists
small and white
a few caught on fire

my pajamas itched
and i threw some rice
at the
dustbunny newlyweds

the bride was crying
and she stuck
to my sock

DAVID MENDOZA

Our Ford and Savior

In Los Angeles
you are not complete
not whole
not really real
unconsidered
forgotten
laughable
pitied
humored
poor
if you don't have a car
took detroit to one up the lord
the combustion engine
is the organ that god forgot

Sunday School

Ministerial servants should likewise be serious, not double-tongued, not giving themselves to a lot of wine, not greedy of dishonest gain.

1 Timothy 3:8

He collects
Tithe the toll
Save my soul

Stand up straight
Toilet bowl
Feet so cold

He on knees
Forceful one
Probing tongue

Mine the shocks
Tingle-knot
Not yet taut

His eyes see
Idol me
Going pee

Not the mouth
My first kiss
On the lips

Just before
Me spread bare
He led prayer

The Princess of Grade Five

My friend Jane was the coolest girl in school, for an entire month. Though her reign didn't last long in hindsight, it seems like time moved slower back then. When we were in the fifth grade, she went "steady" with a boy in eighth. He had horrible skin and dirty hair; what he lacked in looks was somehow paled by the shadow of his maturity. Jane and Carlos' romance lasted exactly two weeks, and three days. It equaled an eternity of pubescent experience to us. She told us how he held her hand when they'd walk to the field of the public school near her house, on Grove St. There, he had given her a French kiss, his braces cutting her upper lip; leaving a small, swollen, criss-cross wound. She taught us how to give the much-talked about hickey. Loudly sharing her stories on the lunch benches, our ears and the blacktop absorbing every word. On the day she told us how he had poked her non-existent breast with his pointer finger, my best friend Vicky spilled her juice box all over her five button, freshly bleached, uniform shirt. Most of the girls were jealous, didn't believe. Some called Jane ugly names that reverberated off the porcelain sinks in the girls' bathroom. Hard words: tramp, slut, cheap-words they had learned from their mothers when their fathers paid a bit too much attention to pretty waitresses, flirting for tips—as if we even knew what those words really meant. No matter what they whispered into burning ears, they still came every day to listen. All I knew was that I was terrified. I thought no boy would ever hold my hand, kiss me on wet grass beneath a Eucalyptus tree, getting his

teeth stuck in my braces; scared about the things I'd only learn from someone else's stories. Worse, I somehow knew that the crown would never be mine, and that the other girls would never hiss those slanderous things about me.

JOSEPH MATTSON

Night in the Dawn of Yesterday

There is a bowl of milk
that rests on a bedside
table next to where my
mother sleeps,
in it is the last testament
of love
so I take some care
not to spill it

my father pulls me aside
and begs me to take time to
know whichever woman
I plan to love forever, for
he has made a terrible mistake

although, I do not know my
father, and my mother is silently
slipping into the folds of eternity

LISA KELLY

Gustave Courbet's *The Sea*

The solution
to life's misery
floats out of reach
in the hold of that sailboat,
alone, out at sea.

Men have stripped naked
and swum for days
in passionate desperation,
women have built rafts
and followed that sail, that mast;
but no one has brought the boat ashore.

I saw a man reach the boat's hull,
but a great wave seized him.
I saw a woman stand on a deck,
but she jumped into the froth
to save a drowning infant.

I saw myself
at the top of the mast
waving a flag
the color of the sky,
but the flag consumed me.
I caught one glance
into the hull of that boat,
but could not trade my humanity
to know the secret within it.

MARILYN BRADFORD-EVANS

Hot San Joaquin Summers

Hot San Joaquin summers, long passed by,
we looked forward to your coming.
Your days were blissfully warm extending into night.
Oh! summer, what wonders you did bring;

Muscat grapes, succulent watermelon off the vine,
apricots so ripe and sweet.

Those golden sunflowers that grew taller than
our heads
and leaned over smiling down into our little
grinning faces.

The yellow poppies that glisten on the hillsides,
and wild flowers bent gleefully in the
summer's breeze.

The hot ground baked our running feet,
and turned our brown bodies even blacker.

In the summer heat, we played.
Mystical heat waves danced across the roads,
but mulberry and peach trees offered shade
while we sucked nectar so sweet, and juices
ran down our arms.

As children, we thought your stay was not too long.
Oh! summer, you eased into fall with amber leaves.
Then came winter, harsh and cold.
Spring, we welcomed,
but summer, your days were the best of all.

LISA KELLY

Chemical Sadness

To my husband

It's a different kind of sadness-
body creaking, groaning, seething
under the weight of super-hormones:
the injectable gods of fertility.
Ovaries ache, eggs mature, sperm line up
while our minds are reeling.

I shiver and shudder
through this continual shifting
of moods and tones, trying
yoga, meditation, breathing-still,
the relentless chemicals oozing, mixing, burn-
ing,
but never soothing.
Denied the optimism of alcohol or coffee,
I yearn for sleep.

It's a different kind of sadness,
for our usual selves are buried within it,
drunk on conversation with my
hormone-pumped body,
stifled by secret fears,
but held together with the glue
of un-used-up hope.

Life's cruel mysteries continue.
Together, we'll see.

STEPHEN ARATHUZIK

The Male Image: A Memoir

The pickup rolled down the two-lane highway as the oldies leapt from the radio. A small paper bag sat between the two passengers and marked the chasmic distance between them. The thirty one miles of doo-wop, motown, and classics would never change, nor would the paper bag ever entirely empty.

The first puff of Dad's Winston danced with the aroma of his day's first coffee. Clad in his unchanging sneakers, jeans, flannel, and baseball cap, he smiled mockingly at me, for Ma had attended to my wardrobe. He said nothing and everything with that smile, and I hated and loved him for it. Paul Simon's guitar would begin and become the sound track of our relationship. Art Garfunkel would give it shape. The pickup truck rolled onward.

I would occasionally steal a glance at my father as we drove away from our home in the Granite State toward the grim city of his youth. He was both granite and grim in his resolve as he steered us nearer our destination and further from each other. One Winston followed the next, and we always stopped for more coffee.

The winter sun was never a friend in New England as it only teased of a warmth that waited months away. When Dad would roll his window down a crack, the cold would dive inside and do battle with fingers and toes. I never complained, but I would always aim the heating vents of the pickup at me. After all, Dad had his flannel, and they were *his* Winstons. Sometimes I laugh about it now: that chasm of silent confrontation where my victories were private smiles out the passenger-side window,

and my defeats were a confirmation of whose pickup it was.

Atlantic air let in by one of Dad's seemingly endless victories suggested that we were nearing the city that though once populated by witch-burners, was now kept alive by fishermen. Hardy, hard-drinking Irishmen (some Italians too, I think) would kiss their wives goodbye, threaten their kids with a violent return if they did not behave, and then head out on dangerous-looking boats with poles and ropes and nets and traps. They would hunt the icy Atlantic waters for the next month's food and rent, for gas for their boats, and of course, for their whiskey. The fishermen would return with beards and stories and would stop off for a couple at the nearest pub to compare both with other battered salty hunters. After too many, they would remember their families, forget their promises and head home. Dad wasn't a fisherman, but I had uncles that were. Anyway, we had arrived.

The place always hung on the verge of being too dark or too bright, but I remember it as a perfect gray. The Male Image had a charm about it. Maybe it stole the city's charm. The House of Seven Gables, The Witch Museum, Gallows Hill, and The Old North Church suffused the place with a character that perhaps it did not innately possess. The old Salem jail, a menacing fortress of brick, fencing, and wire, loomed ominously around the corner from the place and lent it its tone. The ocean air helped too.

In the waiting room I wondered why Eileen and Stan occupied the wing that they did. At least two or three chairs were always empty in another room, one that Dad and I only passed through on our way to see Eileen. From the waiting room I could see out of the one window that provided a lackluster view of one side of an adjacent brick building. The red of the brick and the gray of the place led me to believe that

the sun didn't often shine in the seventies. Maybe people only lived at night.

I remember the wallpaper, the funk of black and white that framed Eileen's workspace. In front of her large mirror sat scissors, electric razors, a blow-dryer, and combs in blue liquid. Her chair seemed only ever to hold my dad or me, while Stan's adjacent throne never appeared occupied. Dad and I made a regular pilgrimage to see Eileen.

Stan was straight out of the seventies: his feathered dark hair half-contrasted with a gold chain (maybe more than one) that rested less than elegantly upon his hairy Italian chest, and his shirt always seemed *too* unbuttoned. He seemed only to live his life on those days that Ma sent Dad and me on our journey to get haircuts. I later heard that in addition to cutting hair Stan was a fireman, but his appearance made that impossible for me to believe.

I remember the women of the decade, for I discovered them that day in all their nakedness in the waiting room of The Male Image. While waiting for my own haircut, I thumbed through a magazine. Its pages peopled my world with long-haired women whose faces I can't remember. I recall only smiles, breasts, hips, and red and white checkered picnic blankets. Oh what I had discovered! Yet, as I was making only my sixth journey around the sun, it was not okay for me to be "reading" that magazine. That I knew. My solution was simple and did not include not looking at those pictures. I simply placed the magazine with the naked women inside of a more benign publication which I pretended to read. Problem solved.

Eileen finished with Dad's translation of Ma's instructions for my hair, while Dad's baseball cap obscured her artistry on that front. Her work changed nothing. It was temporal, and we would be back again.

As we left the city that afternoon, the sun began to sink quickly and without mercy. The paper bag was empty and the chasm had widened. The Byrds sang of seasons and turning, and it made me sad. Though I didn't know it then, Dad and I would lose each other for a long time. The once-silent confrontations would ferment into something much more volatile. The pickup moved toward home with Dad at the helm. I was navigating, charting. One day I would need a paper bag of my own.

The day that I smelled the ocean and saw naked women was one that my memory will not soon release. I discovered that day a wider world, one polarized by conflict. Things took on meanings that they didn't have before that afternoon. One thing began to mean another. The ocean was power, and women were beauty. I began to sense and feel things after that day for which I didn't have words at the time. My world had been fractured.

Later I would read books about archetypal journeys and symbols. I would learn about dads and sons and booze and families. I would learn of innocence and its loss. I would read about men and women and relationships. I would learn how to love and hate at the same time. I would learn of amends and forgiveness. More than all of that though, I would learn that Dad taught me everything that I would ever need to know about *me* in that one day without ever uttering a word. He was my guide, and he taught me everything because he never changed.

We would repeat our ritual journey to The Male Image for a few more years. The pickup would clatter along, and the Winstons and coffee would still take me hostage in the morning. Winters stayed cold, and oldies stayed old. Dad still wore a baseball cap, jeans and a flannel. Sneakers too.

P. J. EMERY

Dia de los muertos, dos mil tres

For days we watched smoke from the *copal* rise
To dim the burning star and sanguine moon.
We prayed to Guadalupe for her aid
And held our breath.

The *calaveras* roused
(;Mire! Those bark beetles for his eyes?)
Our displaced relatives would find no sleep
Until we set the food and marigolds
And candles on the television sets.
Milagro del cielo, after that
We got some rain.

When flesh returns to ash
And bone returns to dust, we celebrate
That death is not the opposite of life.
But still, I'm glad the rains came. I would hate
To scare *mis padres*, who would think this hell.

LEE FISHBACK

Yield

As your spirit retreats, your fleash recedes
and squatters move in: plots of darkness
between your teeth. Tenacious claims
reduce you to ash gripped tightly with grief
poised on the shoveler's sure hand.

When the moist maw yields, I cast you
away, flittering silt, twisting, then gone.
The rest of you refuses.
Diving for the grave, your ash seeks its own,
but in my palm, bonemeal,
tiny teeth digging into my skin.

STEVE SAUCEDO

Obituary (2003)

He was never a good speaker—
He lisped and stuttered and went Ummm too much.
He had an oblong head shaped
like a spittoon. A Neanderthal jaw.

Immaculate hair.

This man forced coughs and faked limps for
sympathy, and he honked his car's horn
too often while stuck in traffic.
He feared going bald so much that whenever
a hair strayed from his head, within his grasp,
he would eat it.

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