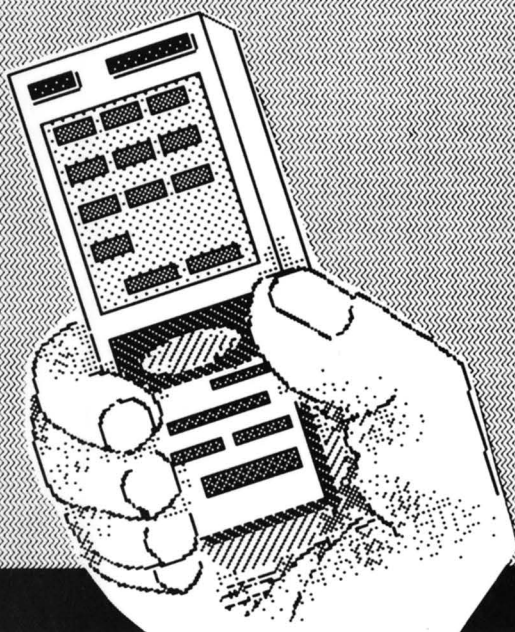


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Touchstone is an annual publication of literature by students from across the nation. The editors welcome submissions of art, photography, fiction, essays, and poetry. Manuscripts must be typed and double spaced. Please include an SASE.

Touchstone provides the campus and the community with a tangible learning experience, a valuable forum for publication, and a stimulating collection of prose and verse.

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whose efforts made this edition possible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

“A Poem for Sarah Only” by Shane Farmer
Winner of the 1992 Touchstone Award for Poetry 4

“Refraction” by Todd Goodman
Winner of the 1992 Touchstone Award for Fiction 5

How to Be a Jerk
Gerard R. Ferone II 19

Country Song
Ed Skoog 20

This Is The Morning
Shane Farmer..... 21

corporate weathermaking
Bill Kaul 23

The Shower
Traci Bryant..... 24

In The Parking Lot Outside Sears
Geoff McCalmont 25

The Hardness
Chris Pealer 26

swimming
Colleen M. Carow 32

In The Toronto Youth Hostel
Shane Farmer..... 33

Upon Listening to Clara Schumann
Richard Gassan..... 34

Death of a Sea-God
Richard Andrade 35

A Poem for Sarah Only

i.

Sarah
never show this poem
to anyone,
because if the men who swirl
and ebb against the base of your window
in cold gray fury knew
the language of our embrace,
if they knew how I tremble
and shudder as I try
to fit you in-between
the spaces in my ribs;
if they knew they would cast up
their icicle eyes like a host
of cold-screaming crows to nettle and pick
at the spaces between the fingers
locked behind your back.

ii.

Sarah
show this poem to everyone,
because the real cannot be found
in the gray spaces between my arms.
More passes between us when we sit
on the window-sill with my hand
resting light upon your belly than
I could ever dream of harnessing
on my own.

Shane Farmer

Refraction

by Todd Goodman

The Gateway Arch gleamed over me, like a giant metallic ribbon, enormous in the over-white light of spring. The day was crisp and clear. Far up, at the apex of the arch itself, I could see the line of viewing windows placed in the side of the monument. Tourists were no doubt looking down at me at that very moment, seeing me as nothing more than a spot of brown among the new colors of April.

This was my first visit to the arch since moving to St. Louis. I sat perfectly still on a wooden park bench that faced the arch and stared up at it, through it. I had been told that it was just taller than the Statue of Liberty. I had absolutely no idea how tall that would make it. Everything is one useless comparison to something else. Love is like the wind. Beth had said that. Beth was always comparing. Beth didn't know I was in St. Louis. I had been here almost two weeks; I had lived with her for almost three years.

Off to my right, a small group of boys darted in and out behind trees and shrubs. They had plastic guns in their hands and dome-shaped sensors on their chests. Here, at the base of this immortal landmark, they ducked and ran, ignoring everything but evading the enemy at hand. Gradually, they moved up the sidewalk toward me. They might have been ten or eleven years old. They made quick gestures, speaking only in names.

As they moved past, I became another obstacle for their protection, a living wall of sandbags. Two of them crouched in front of my bench, breathing hard and quick. Theirs was a warfare of endurance. Suddenly, not far behind me, a barrage of laser sounds split the air and the two boys raised, firing over me, using my shape for as much cover as it would provide. As a person, I was completely invisible, a convenient form. They squinted and fired. Not once did they look me in the eye.

One of them must have gotten hit, he mocked the recoil of painful blow as his chest sensor screeched and flashed. Then they both ducked, and turned and ran. His wound must not have been fatal.

I looked back up to the arch. If you were to jump from the very top, how long would it take you to fall—on a calm day?

I would never find out. I was deathly afraid of heights.

* * *

Later that night I met my friend Kevin Ross at his apartment in Clayton. Clayton is really not a city in itself, but a compound section of western St. Louis suburbs—a section that might be passed by in less than a minute on the eight-lane overpass expressway. This area may have been a completely separate city at one time, but was in all

likelihood just a collection of families and shop owners longing for a place of their own, an importance. Small towns grow together—big cities divide into smaller parts. It's all a part of the nature of dwelling. City meetings, town festivals, block parties.

Kevin's apartment building sat off-street, completely surrounded by other complexes and buildings. The wood-shingle siding and weathered copper trim gave the place a sense of worth, a meaningfulness, regardless of the neighboring concrete facades and cinder-block fences. His number was 36B: first parking lot, second sidewalk, last stairway on the east side. The directions he had given to me over the phone.

Both times Kevin and I met since my arrival in St. Louis had been downtown; both times he invited me over for supper at a to-be-planned later date. Tonight was that date. At the door I hesitated, then rang the bell.

It took me a long moment to hear him. As I leaned again for the doorbell, his muffled words reached me through the door. I tried the knob. It was locked. I rang the bell again. This time the door opened swiftly.

"Peter!" He exclaimed.

"Kevin."

He stood smiling, looking me over, staring. I wondered if my fly was down.

"Come in. Come in." He sniffed the evening air. "Sorry about the door, I swear I unlocked it a few minutes ago."

I entered, shutting the door carefully behind me. Kevin was already at the far end of the long room, sitting down at his desk. In front of him the screen of his computer glowed bright. I removed my jacket and draped it carefully over the back of his black leather couch, then joined him at his desk, wondering if he had noticed my entrance at all. Is answering the door a mechanical function, like blinking, that becomes unconscious after repeated so many thousands of times?

On the computer screen, a topless brunette stared at us with three green eyes. Kevin pointed a light pen to the side-bar on the monitor and tapped a key on the keyboard. Instantly the face of the girl enlarged to fill the entire screen. Her eyes looked back at us, taunting, almost three dimensional. Eyes like Beth's.

"It's a joke we're playing on one of the guys on the layout team," he explained. "It's his birthday tomorrow."

I nodded. Kevin had been an outstanding artist throughout high school and college. When I first met him, in the eighth grade, he was already painting in oils on full-sized canvas. An artistic genius at age fourteen. Now he worked for a large graphic design firm downtown, his specialty: airbrush retouching of photographs. He had given me a tour of his downtown studio the week before. Car advertisements, reelection posters, the oiled bodies of centerfolds—if it was blemished,

he could make it look perfect. His portfolio was absolutely incredible. I remembered my childhood hatred for his natural talent.

In his off time Kevin designed computer graphics for local television stations and commercial organizations. The computer I now viewed was state of the art equipment, the cutting edge of video technology. With it he was God.

As I watched, the three-eyed girl on the screen gained a long, forked tongue. Kevin laughed and shook hysterically as he drew, so much so that I wondered if he would indeed fall over before finished. I asked him for a drink, he replied with a nod toward the crowded kitchen, and I helped myself.

When he had completed the girl's tongue he joined me by the fireplace with a drink of his own. There was no fire.

"Heard from Beth lately?" he asked.

"Not since the move. I didn't give her my number."

"Oh come on, what's the hang-up? Don't you think she deserves the courtesy of at least a phone number? I mean, okay, so she dumped you. She still *looks* real good."

Kevin was never as subtle in conversation as he was in paint.

"I wasn't dumped," I said. "She just needed space."

"She needed space? Space for what? She was just tired of the bullshit you gave her about her career. She said you whined. She called you a dick-head."

"She called me a dick-head? How polite." I tried to chuckle. "I'm surprised you didn't agree with her."

"Did I say I didn't?" He smelled his drink and smiled wide.

Kevin and I have always had a loose relationship of mutual degradation. We speculated that by making our lives sound as miserable and pathetic as we could, we would somehow gain a higher level of pleasure from everyday monotony. I still believe today that it works. Laughter and lies cure the strangest of ailments.

Several hours later, our shared history was revealed once again in exaggerated speech that is poured, stirred, and swallowed deep. Kevin was making more money than he knew what to do with. Everyone wanted his talent. I had no money, no job, no reason. Kevin was very drunk. I wasn't so lucky. I sat watching the fire he had barely managed to start in the fireplace. The flames darted and jumped from log to log, tiny dancers among the ashes. How many fires like this one had I watched with Beth? She would move toward me in silhouette, her auburn hair glowing, and she would bathe me in whispers, and light touches, and the glorious heat of bare skin. Together we would watch the fire die.

A log fell to one side, sending brilliant white sparks up with the flames.

"Personality doesn't wear tight jeans, Peter."

Kevin's voice was severely slurred. I had absolutely no idea what he meant. I closed my eyes and listened to the hissing of the heartbeats in my ears. The next morning, I found the package.

* * *

Mrs. Weatherby rang my doorbell at eleven in the morning. I was riding a dinosaur, some immense prehistoric beast, when I heard the pitiful noise. At first, it sounded familiar: a large bird circling far above, or the rush of air being released by steam engine. But slowly the pitch of the noise changed, droning down and down. I pulled hard on the reins of the giant creature that I rode. It refused any correct response, swinging its massive head from side to side, gnashing its needle-thin teeth. To my right a crowd of fur-clad women cat-called their displeasure at my lack of control. They all had three eyes. Their chanting gradually changed tone to match the noise from above.

"Mmmiiiiisssttteerrr Nnnneewwwsssoommme."

I pulled with all my strength on the reins, the sweat-hardened leather cutting into my palms . . . There was no response; it didn't even notice. Then I was slipping, falling . . .

"Mr. Newsome!"

I sat straight up in bed, clutching my covers with panicked grip. I looked to one side of the room then the other, confused.

"Mr. Newsome. Are you in there?" A voice accented by age: Mrs. Weatherby's. I stood. On the third try I managed to undo the bolt on the door, and slowly swung it open, Mrs. Weatherby's face meeting mine.

"Well good morning, Mr. Newsome, if I dare to still call it morning. Do you realize the hour?"

Her face wrinkled with every syllable. Mrs. Weatherby is my neighbor, a kind-of-heart, aged, British expatriate. I had told her a few, select things about myself when I moved in: I had never moved this far before; I had a friend here; I was from Boulder. I mistakenly told her I was unemployed.

She was winding her watch, shaking her head slowly back and forth.

"No, Mrs. Weatherby. I overslept again." I rubbed my eyes with one hand.

"Well I do think it is time you bought yourself a proper alarm, sleeping to all hours won't find you a job, now will it."

Mrs. Weatherby was also a widow.

"No, I suppose it won't," I said.

I looked down at the floor, at the carpet worn thin by thousands of entries and exits, aware of the rum still lingering in my head. My eyes shifted into focus on something wrapped in brown paper. There was a package leaning against the door frame.

"Oh yes," Mrs. Weatherby cleared her throat quietly. "There's a

parcel for you—didn't come by regular post. Must have been one of those overnight services."

I looked up at her, and thanked her quietly. She turned and left without comment, walking slowly to her door down the hall.

I picked up the package with both hands and was slightly surprised at its weight. It measured barely the size of a shoebox, but it had incredible bulk to it.

Behind me, the phone rang twice, then stopped.

I shut the door, examining the package. There was something very wrong about it. The address was correct, but the name, artlessly printed in thick red magic marker, read *Antanian Ng*—certainly not my name, nor anyone else's that I could recall. How extraordinarily odd. I set the package down on the worn varnished surface of my coffee table and set about making myself something to eat.

The phone rang again. This time I answered it before the second ring.

"Hello? Hello Peter?" A female voice. It was Beth.

I tried to sound indifferent. "Hello Beth. How did you get my number?"

"From Kevin. Is that all you can say? You left town without even saying good-bye."

"I know" I said.

"I know? Is that all?"

"Look, I left town when I felt like it, because I felt like it."

"But you didn't have to leave in such a hurry did you?"

She sounded sarcastic.

"You of all people should understand the primal thrill of spontaneity," I said. "You are certainly practiced in the art, are you not?" There was no reply. "And I don't seem to remember any discussions about YOUR over-calculatedness. I also don't recall any signed documents that might have required my telling you of any move I decided to make."

She was silent.

"Why did Kevin give you my number?" I said.

"Because I asked."

"What if I told him not to?" Again I was trying to sound indifferent.

"Did you tell him not to?"

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't say you didn't, either. Tell me straight, why did you tell Kevin not to give out your number?"

"Look, it's my business whether I told Kevin he could or could not give out my number."

"But did you tell him or not?"

"It's my business."

"Did you?"

Now I was getting aggravated. "You are never pleased with what

I say, are you? You never were when we lived together, you aren't now, and you obviously never will be."

"Abondance de biens ne nuit pas," she said.

"What?" I hated when she spoke French.

"Never too much of . . . nevermind. Look, I didn't call you to fight. I called to give you my new number and address. I'm trying to be civil about this. So get a pen, and write this down."

"You're moving out again?"

She paused. "No, I'm moving in."

I paused. "With who?"

"Jamie."

"Jamie?"

"Jamie, remember? The blonde girl from the health club. You said she had a nice ass."

"Oh. I thought you hated dumb blondes."

"At least it's real blonde, not dyed."

I used to dye my hair black, to prevent what was sure to be premature and ugly graying. I was barely twenty-eight. Gray hair was not an asset at twenty-eight.

"You blame me for recessive genes," I said. "I thought Jamie was a lesbian."

"She is."

"Actively?"

"Look Peter, I really wanted to talk to you about this in person but you left town and—"

"Spare me." I hesitated. "I don't think I can handle this right now."

"Peter—"

"I said spare me." I swallowed hard against my dry throat and placed the receiver back in its cradle. The package on the table seemed to jeer at me with its red scrawled print.

* * *

Kevin met me for lunch that same day at a Cajun restaurant by the river. Lunch was my suggestion—Cajun was his. The place was not large, a modest patio sporting small tables with red and white umbrellas, providing some refuge from the harsh light of the afternoon sun. Kevin sat near the edge of the patio, smelling the plastic flowers arranged on the table. He waved to me. I joined him and ordered. He had already been served.

"So what is it that you wanted to talk to me about?" He was fishing a claw of some sort from his gumbo. "You sounded a little nervous on the phone."

Perhaps I was nervous. I scanned the other diners on the patio, making a gesture with my hand as if my perusal were part of a natural

act. Young professionals, secretaries, aging vice-presidents. For the most part they immersed themselves in the barbaric act of consumption; what little they said was in the language of business, uttered in whispers between bites. I was completely unnoticed.

Kevin was sniffing a claw from the bottom of his soup. He set it aside on the tablecloth, in line with the patterned squares, and continued stirring with his oversized spoon. Assorted spices and sauces sat near the middle of the table, alongside the vase of plastic flowers. Our table was the only one lacking an umbrella.

"Have you ever gotten someone else's mail by mistake?" I asked.

"Happens all the time."

"All the time?"

"All the time." He slurped in a spoonful of the thin, dark liquid. "An old lady that lived in my apartment before I did forgot to change her address when she left for a care-home."

"And what do you do with it?"

"With the mail, just leave it in the box. The postman figures out after a week or so that I don't want it and takes it away."

"A week," I said.

"More or less. Just junk mail. Sweepstakes and stuff."

There were assorted leaves and dark flakes in the bottom of his bowl. I watched as he picked through these carefully, eyeing each with curious suspicion.

"I love this kind of food," he said. "I lived in Alabama, near the border, for almost two years and never tasted a bite. Only when I moved here did I realize what I had missed. I come to this place twice a week when the weather is nice. Lovely view, don't you think?"

Beyond the terrace, a hundred yards or so, the Mississippi snuck slowly by, carrying tugs and barges on its flat, broad back. A helicopter made its way up river toward us, the air still and thick as it throbbed by. Behind us, the noise off traffic surged in great waves, caught between office buildings and high-rise hotels.

Kevin lifted his butter knife and turned it in the sun, reflecting light at the table, then to his face, then back again.

"So why do you ask about mail?"

"I got someone else's and I don't know what to do with it," I said, "nothing more." I sipped at my drink.

"Throw it away," he said.

"What?"

"The mail. Throw it away."

"It's not just mail, its a package of some kind."

"A package? Did you open it?"

"No. I didn't open it. It isn't mine to open."

"So? How will anyone know if you do? It could be something important."

"Exactly. That's why I'm not going to open it."

"Oh. And I suppose it won't fit in your box," he said.

"No. It was left at my door."

"Take it to the post office, they should know what to do with it."

"I tried that; I called them. They have no listing of the person it is addressed to. They say it is my problem."

"Return address?"

"None," I said.

"That is a problem."

"Thanks." I finished my drink. My food was taking a very long time. "By the way, have you heard from Beth lately?"

"No, should I have?" He looked at me with his head crooked, a very canine expression on his face.

"No, I guess not," I said. "It's not important anyway."

On the river, a tug let out a long, churning bellow.

* * *

The next morning, halfway through breakfast, I realized I didn't have a cat. I hadn't slept well. My head was burning. My dreams had come in sudden and short bursts—much like how I imagined electroshock therapy. The three-eyed women had returned. They sat in circles around a fire, French-kissing each other with their long, forked tongues. One of them, apart from the rest, kept screaming and screaming as if in unceasing pain.

In the middle of the night I had struggled to the bathroom. The light from the bare bulb washed everything in white pain. I squinted. On the floor I saw half a dozen crickets, shriveled and dead, scattered alone and in pairs across the pale yellow tile of the floor. My bathroom is the only room located in the basement, below the kitchen, and in the short time since my moving in I had noticed that it was a gathering place of many nocturnal creatures—some much stranger than crickets. The outstanding feature of these crickets came to me later, as I reached to turn the light back off. They all seemed to be missing one leg.

The cat must have gotten to them, I had reasoned. Crickets don't just lose legs, like snakes shedding. I flipped off the switch and climbed the stairs. The rest of the night had passed as dreamless as static.

The toast I ate the next morning was burnt on one side. I had forgotten to stand watch over the toaster and switch the slices halfway through to evenly cook both faces. Crickets with missing legs, girls with extra eyes. Everything is like something else.

I have never liked cats. Beth had kept a cat all three years we lived together. Buttons. What a retarded name. All the laziness of generations upon generations of domestics wrapped into one always-shedding bundle. I still check my food and utensils for stray hairs. Beth never did.

After breakfast, I opened the package.

The sunlight streamed through the blinds of my only eastern window, revealing a swirling mirage of normally invisible heat patterns on the floor. The shapes formed and blended, calm, softly violent. Refraction. It was nearly ten o'clock.

The box sat patiently on the coffee table, its red letters watching me. For a long moment I simply stared back from where I sat in the kitchen. It simply wanted to be unwrapped: there was a corner of the wrapping that stuck out like an odd ear, creating an open invitation for the exploration of the treasures of the package. Or so I explained to myself. I moved from the kitchen to the couch beside the table. And waited. Nothing happened.

I reached out and lifted it with both hands, then shook it gently back and forth like a birthday present. Certainly it was a shoebox—my hands could feel the ridge around the top of the box. And even though the mass that shifted inside was far too great for a pair of shoes, I slipped my finger into the loose corner of the brown paper wrapping, and pulled, convinced that inside awaited nothing more than misdelivered footwear.

The packing tape, reinforced by tiny strands of fiberglass, sliced a very thin, very painful slit neatly across my index finger. I began to bleed. Cursing quietly, I got up and moved to the paper towel holder by the sink. The wound, small as it was, hurt horribly. I dabbed at the drops of blood, watching them absorb slowly into the fibers of the towel. From the top drawer I removed a butter knife—a clean one—and returned to the package.

At first I was careful. If the contents revealed more about the owner of the package, as I hoped, I would simply wrap it back up, tape it to match the original, and place it wherever it belonged. All would be right.

My hands fumbled with the knife as my impatience mounted. The tape was considerably stronger than I expected, yet I tried not to mangle it. With no outward marks, there would be no suspicion of third party involvement, and my conscience would be cleared. Opening someone else's mail became one further step in its delivery process. I pulled again. The paper ripped suddenly, violently, bisecting the red lettered address.

The box underneath was blue.

I pulled it closer, to the edge of the table, then sucked at the cut on my finger, thinking. This was a problem. I began slow calculations in my head: brown paper, packing tape, a red marker. It could still be re-wrapped.

The rest of the wrapping now slipped off easily. The box was indeed a shoebox; it said *Nike*. I lifted off the lid. Newspaper. The box was filled with newspaper. It reminded me of Christmas. And of Beth. The smell of the ink was always strong, and I knew that if I rubbed my hands against the type on the crinkled pages my fingers would blacken, and that blackness would spread to my face—no matter how careful I was—and she would point and tell me about it much later, in public, insuring my complete embarrassment. And we would laugh.

I reached carefully into the box, searching for a loose end of the newspaper. It was tucked in one side. Slowly I lifted it. More newspaper. Again I found the edge and pulled it aside. This time, I saw something other than paper. It was purple cloth. It was velvet.

I touched it gingerly, then stroked it with two fingers. It was material similar to that used on old theatre seats, but finer, like the insides of the very small boxes that rings are given in. I've never given anyone a ring. Beth and I talked seriously about marriage only when we were drunk. Or when we fought.

I flattened my hands and slipped them between the velvet and the sides of the box, curling my fingers carefully beneath the object, and lifted it out onto the table. I found the end of the cloth and began unwrapping. It seemed mummified in a strange sort of way. I was now a postal archeologist. Halfway into the third wrap I saw a glint of metal, and I set the object down beside the box before slipping the rest of the wrap off, revealing it fully.

Oh Jesus. It was a gun.

Its blue-black metallic surface reflected the room in snake patterns of light and dark, its perfectly tooled edges and curves gleaming. It was exquisite. So exact and meaningful. Nothing compromised. Framed by the dark purple velvet, the gun waited alluringly, a most deadly engagement ring.

Then the phone rang.

I froze.

Someone had figured it all out. Someone knew I had it. Someone wanted it back. I knew I had to do something, something quick and easy and sure; I had to get rid of it or hide it before someone came for it.

The phone rang a second time. I grabbed for the box, for the velvet, started to wrap, quickly, carelessly, lifted the gun to the box . . .

It was like something filmed in fast motion photography, replayed hundreds of times slower than life. The gun slipped from under one corner of the velvet, and fell. It just sailed down, gracefully. A drop of milk, or a humming bird beating its wings. I didn't once think that it might be loaded, that it might go off. Instead I thought of the dead crickets from my bathroom floor. As a child, I would have placed each in its own match box and would have buried them in the tall weeds behind the garden, like distant relatives I should have known.

The gun hit the floor with a resounding *THUD*. I looked up. the phone was silent.

Now I faced an entirely new problem: the gun was on the floor, naked, possibly loaded. It was not a revolver—there were no holes in it to hold bullets that I could see. The velvet was still in my hands, soothing my fingertips—but if I picked the gun up and dropped it again, this time it just might fire. It just might blow my foot clean off. But it couldn't be loaded. Who in their right mind would send a loaded gun through the mail? Ridiculous question.

I looked back at the phone. My face felt hot. My gut ached. Sitting down, I picked up the shoebox. There was still something in it. A smaller box, under the last piece of newspaper. It read: *Blazer 9mm*. It was a box of bullets.

Okay, so the gun wasn't loaded. I opened the lid of the little box, revealing the brass casings inside. They too appeared to be as perfect as the gun itself. Articulate. I took one out, handled it gently, rolled it in my fingers. It was so cold. So very bullet-shaped. It felt exactly as I had expected a bullet to feel—perhaps too exactly.

I leaned forward a bit to catch a glimpse of the gun, still quietly waiting by my feet. The light in the room had dimmed, the sun passing behind the clouds. the shape of the gun was elusive in this light, malleable. A chill ran through me to the base of my spine. It looked like it wanted to be held.

Placing the bullet back in its box, I suddenly came to a decision. It was so very simple. In all of the city of St. Louis, in all of its hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of people sprawling out across millions of acres, I was but one. It was a very big place. And having never been in contact with the police, not even so much as a traffic violation, it was reasonable to assume that there was no possible way that anyone had a copy of my fingerprints. There was little chance that the FBI would check the files of babies born twenty-eight years ago to try and match fingerprints on a gun. And even if they tried, the odds against a match must be astronomical. I sucked at the cut on my finger.

It had to be done, something I knew I had to do. I stood up, moved the coffee table over to allow plenty of room, and knelt beside the gun. The floor was hard and cold against my knees. Like ice. I shifted my weight. The gun now seemed to be watching me, as if smiling at my decision. I reached for it slowly, determined to do this exactly. At first contact I flinched slightly—I waited for the phone to ring. Nothing.

My fingers gently rested on the surface of the handle. It was black plastic. Rough. Not like sandpaper or burlap, but a reassuring kind of rough, a grippable kind. My fingers slipped easily around the handle, gripping it as it begged to be gripped. It was heavy.

I turned it in the light, looking it over, like a piece of sculpture I might purchase. The flat sides of the barrel were engraved. LLAMA.

Was this a brand name, or a model? I knew llamas were found in South America. Beth had a rug made of llama wool that the cat would sleep on. It smelled salty. She bought it at a backwater shop in Denver, in a place that seemed as far away as South America.

My finger was on the trigger. It felt good.

I held the gun at arm's length, rotating my wrist, testing my strength. I pointed it at the window. Then at the door. The urge to pull the trigger was almost overwhelming. Adrenaline surged through my body in waves. I was trembling. My finger quivered on the trigger, paper cut itching madly. Exhale, then squeeze. I overheard that once in an army surplus store. I had bought a canteen.

The hammer slid back, clicked, and snapped home. The sound echoed sharply through the room.

I would learn how to load it. It was something I felt I needed to know. Then I would go back to the Arch.

* * *

It was three o'clock. I walked to Gateway Park from the eastern edge of downtown, from a multi-level parking garage. The gun was tucked in the front of my jeans, loaded, safety on. It was warm from the heat of my skin. It itched.

I stopped for a moment at the base of one of the legs of the arch itself. It was enormous. I stood close to the outside face of the leg, looking up at the gradually curved edges that disappeared before converging somewhere high above. It was a weird kind of roadway into the sky. No line markings, no medians. I looked around. The boys I had seen before were not here. The bushes were only bushes today, their war had been called off.

Following the ramp down, I entered the doors to the Arch Museum complex. It too was enormous. The lighting was dim, and my eyes adjusted slowly. I spotted the small ticket booth off to one side and I slid my hand under my jacket to adjust the gun.

The ticket was less than five bucks. For some reason I had expected it to be more. I nodded as the girl in the booth counted back my change, her voice coming through the small hole in the glass in low, reassuring tones. I had no idea if she counted it back correctly. Her hands were smooth and thin. She pointed behind me and smiled. To the stairs.

I kept my toes behind the yellow stripe painted on the floor. I had been told to do this. For my own safety. The flight of stairs that led back up to the museum area gradually flattened into long tiers at this point, each tier opening to a small door on the right. These were the doors to the elevators. A grandmother and her grandson stood a tier down from me, studying information in Arch brochures. The boy nodded.

“And when the wind blows you can feel it move,” he was saying. “It sways back and forth like a big swing. But they say it won’t fall.”

He looked at me over his shoulder. It was too late for me to smile. The doors to our right clicked and the uniformed man at the bottom of the stairs motioned us to enter.

At first it was difficult. The elevator cars were small, like a ride at an amusement park, and there were thin benches formed in the curved, capsule-shaped walls. I had to bend forward as I sat, the gun pressing hard against my abdomen. The boy and his grandmother were two cars in front of me, I could hear him explaining facts. This ride up would take over two minutes. The cars would shift periodically to account for the increasing curve of the Arch. We could stay at the top as long as we liked. It was normal to feel movement.

Again, my face felt hot.

Ever so slowly the train of elevators crept up the shaft, the shaft that was the inside of the Arch. The only opening in the tiny compartment was a screen set in the roof above my head. It pressed annoyingly against my scalp as I turned my head. I was very glad that I was not claustrophobic. I could barely see the other cars ahead of me, the inside reinforcements passing by the emergency stairs. No one could see me. I removed the gun from beneath my shirt. Its metal was hot in my hand; it seemed to like this adventure. It was glad we were here. It wanted to stay in my hand, in the open air, not tucked tight away. It wanted to look out the glass windows, to see things from the top. To look down upon everything. It wanted to be noticed.

I wondered how Beth would feel if tomorrow’s headlines were about my actions. *Mad Gunner Kills Self, Three Others, At Arch.* She might smile at first. She might shake her head for a moment, hoping for some mistake, then cry out my name in loud sobs. She might become hysterical. She would compare this to something criminal. Kevin would only call me a dick-head.

It would be so simple. The doors would open, I would walk out into the viewing area, I would raise the gun. The old lady would scream as I pointed it at the elevator operator. I would say, “Freeze.” The boy would watch me in wonder. I would smile at him as I squeezed the trigger, the recoil jolting my arm, the elevator operator falling against the wall, streaking blood. I would laugh deep as I pointed it at them. They would notice. The thing I had done would be important. Then I would shoot them both, in the head, to make it quick. I would break the glass from one window, put the gun to my temple, and bend out. After I had fired the last shot, the gun would fall slowly to the ground below, in ever-increasing spirals, timing its own approach. It was a calm day.

The train of elevator cars jolted. I tucked the gun quickly away. The doors opened.

It wasn’t flat. I had expected it to be flat, normal, like any room

at the top of a tall building should be—but it wasn't. It wasn't normal in any way. The floor curved up toward the center of the narrow space, the walls leaning away from the floor at an incredible angle. The windows I had seen from the ground a few days ago were not much bigger than the screen of Kevin's computer. To look out of them effectively you would have to lean out onto the wall. The elevator operator closed the doors behind us. I could hear the wind whistling outside.

My stomach was sweaty against the butt of the gun, uncomfortable. The grandmother was standing at the far end of the row of windows. She did not lean against the wall where her grandson was pasted, face to glass. She was smiling. The light that came through the small windows was yellow and warm. I walked in small, careful steps to the center, the highest point in the room. Out one side I could barely see downtown, hotels, the baseball stadium. Out the other side, the Mississippi, bridges, floating restaurants. There was distance here, a void between this space and the world below. It was a separation—a tangible, measurable thing.

I moved closer to a west window, toward downtown, the side I had seen from the park bench. My feet touched the base of the wall where it met the floor. I stretched my neck up, out toward the glass. I could not yet see the park benches. I would have to lean.

I reached out slowly with one hand, touched the wall. It was covered with dense-woven carpet. I didn't have to shift my balance much with my arm extended this way, my palm flat on the surface. I hesitated. The gun seemed to urge me on, powerful in its silence.

I lifted my other arm carefully toward the wall. I must have looked like a horror-film zombie, my arms outstretched in this fashion. Kevin would have laughed had he seen me. He would paint this scene, life size, in bold colors. My face would be pale, clammy. He would notice every minute detail. He would sell it for an escalated price.

I bent my knees. Gradually, I began to lean toward the angled wall. Beth wouldn't laugh. Beth just might be proud, knowing I did this. All the things I had missed due to my fear. Glass elevators, overhead walkways, mountain views. She would wink at me, smiling in the way she always did. This would say more than any words she could choose. This would make me happy.

My hands pressed against the wall. I could feel the arch waver ever so slightly, swaying in the wind. It was normal to feel movement. We could stay at the top as long as we liked. I began a slow, reverse push-up, bringing my face closer and closer to the glass.

I didn't have Beth's number. I would have to call information. Or Kevin. Or both.

Softly, gently, my nose pressed against the glass.

How to Be a Jerk

First and foremost
you must talk around her. Never stare.
It's time to call her when her silhouette
wraps around your brain,
holding its oatmeal thoughts.
Be careful if this happens. Don't tell.
She may think you're crazy.
Instead, float like the moon about the earth.
Falling for her,
but never touching her thoughts
with your fondness.
Make sure your pragmatism comes between you
and a blooming love.

Gerard R. Ferone II

Country Song

Charlie, I borrowed a dollar
to buy you a watch for Christmas.

In winter, I look up the road
and think of leaving.
Ice hangs from tree branches
like fat from my mother's arms.
A city bus stops slow
by the grocers', who advertises
rock salt and firewood;
always making a dollar.

There's an honor in loving you,
though you're bad. When you sleep
on the couch while the porch
freezes over, even the drapes
point a long finger at your body,
the carpet even smells like blame.

It's Christmas, today, you dressed
and we went to church and dinner.
You'd shaved, though above the mirror
you'd written a motto: "I'll drink
my booze and do as I please."

You're like a wave, Charlie,
pulling sand from a beach.

Ed Skoog

This Is The Morning

This is the morning that takes place
only in the upper reaches
of the forehead—
I curl against the door of the truck
as the dusty heat from the vents
presses against and around my body
like the slow,
heavy smoke of a campfire;
The rattle of my head against
the window coming to me from across
great distance.

My father stops the truck
and I open the door
to a death-cold wind that races
from under the edges
of a marble-gray bowl.
I take my gun
and totter down the ditch
as my father drives around the corner
to the other side of the field.

I lose balance
crossing under the barbed-wire fence
and tear
the inside of my thigh—
I hold the pain in my teeth and limp
to the ridge of the waterway,
the icicle-wind ripping holes
in the edges of my ears.

My father and his dog advance
from the other edge of the waterway,
moving through the gray-brown brush
in their familiar dance; the dog
dipping and wheeling in and around
like a ghost, my father's thighs
shredding branch after branch as he marches
with his gun across his waist, only
his searching gray eyes deviating
from the line—
coming closer until it seems
we will touch chest
to chest.

With a helicopter thunder of wings
a covey of quail burst from between us
in a third-grade tag scramble—
my eyes rest on one that rises in a high, lazy arch
and it tumbles down like a drunk,
only the shudder against my shoulder
to remind me of my shot.

The dog slips from the thick growth
towards me with the bird in its mouth,
looking at me with my father's eyes.

It places the still-quivering bird
in my hand and glides silently
back to my father.

I place the quail in the pouch of my vest
as I watch father and dog walk together,
the bird burning against my belly.

Shane Farmer

corporate weathermaking

war, being no longer theoretical, like weather
first on the horizon, now in the yard, is real;
we can shovel it, measure it, debate it, ultimately
we must accept it

or not, as traffic jams. a collective bargain,
trading time for money, a deal struck in anger:
but not beyond effect, not falling as rain from the sky
not as dew, which, like it or not, will
softly cover that face of the dead . . .

Bill Kaul

The Shower

slick and slippery
we slide in through
 and out
 around
 each other
water snakes
 delighting in sins
full wetness.

Traci Bryant

In The Parking Lot Outside Sears

It's the twentieth century
and I can't seem to find

my car. I keep a picture
of her in my glove box right

next to my map of Texas
and my tire gauge.

There's a spot on the seat where
she spilled her coke. She never

bothered to clean it up.
Melting black top

stuck to my shoes. She always
told me "You're in danger

of finding yourself lost." Those
Christmas lights are still up

and I wonder if I am really that
afraid of ladders.

Geoff McCalmont

The Hardness

by Chris Pealer

Charlie's Bait and Beer Carry-Out stood off a winding back road at the foot of one of the smaller hills of the Appalachians. A single-story building with a weather-stained face, the shop had only one distinguishing feature about it—a broad wooden sign, flaky with old white paint, reading simply "WORMS" in red letters by the roadside.

Inside behind the counter sat Charlie in a green upholstered Laz-E-Boy brought from his living room. He came here most Sundays, early, even though customers were scarce in the morning. He came because it got him out of church, the tedious air-conditioned sermons, the hand-shaking, the iced tea and the picnic lunches. Those kind of socials made him itch. So Charlie had convinced his wife that Sunday mornings were his busiest time, or at least she let him think he had her convinced. The truth probably was she had more fun at those things without him, and so just let him be. And that was fine, too.

Charlie tuned his little radio to a church service out of Lexington which alternated between a hellfire preacher and a choir singing hymns. The preacher went on about sin, and the endless eating pain, and the love of Jesus and such—Charlie just blocked him out. But the choir music pleased him immensely; he would hum or sing along if he could, watching the road out the open window and enjoying the morning breeze blowing in.

The day hung suspended, serene, Only the branches of the trees overhanging the road, shading Charlie and his shop, would rustle. In the sound Charlie could hear their names: pine, beech, elm, oak. Somewhere a dog barked. Charlie rested with his own dog, Clyde, a black Lab that was sleeping on the floor beside him. The fresh smell of Sunday-morning summer was on the air. Choir voices drifted from the radio, and everything kept at peace with itself.

Then Charlie heard the growl of a car engine coming down the road. He recognized it as Bill Thardess and his '81 Escort returning from the lake. He felt a twinge of anticipation at the sound, for he had pulled something of a joke on old Bill about an hour before. He'd sold him some line and sent him on over to the reservoir to do some fishing—only, there was no reservoir. The County had drained it so they could work on the dam, and Bill had been away and hadn't heard. He would have a few words about it when he got back, though, and Charlie waited with anticipation. This joke would make Charlie's morning, and maybe his entire week.

Bill's Escort zipped down the curvy road and Charlie watched it pull with a roar of gravel into the store's parking lot. Bill stepped out and slammed the door, Charlie keeping a placid smile and offering an unheeded "Good-morning" to him as he trudged past the window. He walked across the gravel to Charlie's door with a deceptive calmness,

a visible restraint. Charlie had promised himself that he would play out the joke for as long as it was possible, but as soon as Bill entered the doorway Charlie lost it all and burst into spasms of laughter.

"You bastard!" Bill accused him immediately, hands clenched into fists at his side. "I'll slap your bald head for you, you bastard!" Clyde roused himself at the commotion and emerged from behind the counter, wagging and sniffing at the new guest.

Charlie floundered on the glass counter, incapable of speech. He would look up to say something only to see Bill fuming, and so begin laughing all over again. This went on for a full minute, Charlie gasping, "Oh Bill, Bill . . ." and Bill hurling blunt curses at him. Intolerably mad, Bill did pose quite a sight. A short, brawny man fresh from a month of camping in the hills, his beard grown curly thick and black, he stood rigid in Charlie's shop caked from head to toe with globs of rust-colored mud. His sky-blue T-shirt was smattered with it, and his blue jeans were brown up to the knee. It smeared his face like Indian war paint, holding his furious blue eyes in sharp relief. He stared at Charlie intensely at the man got hold of himself, and eventually the two faced one another with more or less serious expressions.

Charlie broke the silence first. "Why, Bill," he said, "whatever happened to you?"

"Why, Charlie!" Bill replied, "Gee I don't know! Maybe some dirty bastard sent me off to a lake that wasn't there. Or maybe I tried for an hour to drag my rowboat out of a mud-pit. Or maybe I got so goddamn muddy I swore I'd kill somebody. And maybe, dear friend, you are that bastard that I am going to kill!"

"Oh, are you, now?"

"Yes sir! Now prepare to see heaven, Charlie, 'cause I'm about to send you there!"

"Promises, promises. Idle threats." Charlie leaned back in his chair. "You better have a seat and calm yourself, Bill. You're creating a draft in here." Charlie gestured to a stack of five-gallon buckets to Bill's left, but Bill remained standing. Charlie thought that if looks could kill, he'd have withered already like a weed under kerosene in the August sun.

"Jesus Christ," he said, "you're bristling! Honest to God, bristling your whiskers like a tom-cat. Why don't you grab us a couple of beers out the fridge and sit down here to talk to me."

Reluctantly, even defiantly, Bill strode over to a glass case and grabbed out a six-pack. "There now," Charlie said, "I knew you couldn't pass up free beer." And then, "Hell, I'll help you get the damn boat out myself if it means that much to you."

Bill ripped a can from the plastic ring and handed it silently to Charlie, then sat down on an overturned bucket. Both men popped open their beers and drank for awhile in a silence that Charlie wasn't about to breach. He just sat looking out the window, glancing now and

then at Bill. The undue anger displayed by his friend over what Charlie considered a harmless joke worried him, but he would wait until Bill was cooler to bring it up. The two of them sat there for five or ten minutes, until Charlie thought he heard Bill mutter something.

“What was that, Bill?” He asked.

“I said it was a helluva thing to find the lake dried up, right out from under my boat. Damn dirty trick.”

Charlie wasn't sure whose trick Bill meant, his or the engineers', but he replied, “Yeah. They decided it was time to fix the crumbling Forester Dam. So they had to drain the reservoir. Pissed a lot of folks off.” He hoped a sense of general woe might alleviate Bill's own.

Bill said, “Well they could have at least let people know it was coming, instead of yanking it away like a rug or something.”

“What?”

“Nevermind.”

Charlie watched Clyde push himself up, make his way over to the sunbeam in the entranceway and flump down. Blind with cataracts, half-deaf, and lame in his hindquarters, Clyde's main occupation seemed to be searching out a warm spot of sun on the floor where he could doze. Charlie sometimes tried to imagine the nagging aches and sharp pains his old dog endured every day; perhaps sleeping was his only escape. Charlie knew that the Big Sleep was probably the best thing for Clyde after sixteen years, but he simply couldn't raise the spirit to do it, selfish coward that he was.

Charlie said, “You know, the County sent out letters about the dam, Bill. They contacted everybody who rented dock space.” He looked at Bill. “If you didn't have your boat tied at some secret personal hiding place to avoid the fees, you would have probably found out about the draining of the lake, too.”

Bill pretended not to listen.

“And besides,” Charlie continued, “the paper announced it every day for a week. Big ad in the ‘Community’ section of the *Messenger*.”

“You know I don't get the paper anymore,” Bill said. “It's a waste of my time and money. And even if I did, I've just been up in a cabin in the hills for four and a half weeks and wouldn't have seen it.”

“Well, Charlie said cautiously, trying to tread lightly until he figured out what was eating Bill, “I guess it was a matter of bad luck on your part. That's all.”

“My whole life seems like a matter of bad luck,” Bill muttered and swigged his beer.

Charlie came close then to asking what the problem was outright, but shied away, shifting the talk instead to another topic. “I imagine Kate's gonna give you holy hell when you get home looking like that. I know Emma would damn near hide me for it.”

Bill said nothing.

"If you find yourself about to be kicked outta doors, sleeping in the doghouse, you can blame it all on me. Tell her Charlie did it."

"No," Bill said quietly. "Kate won't say anything."

"Oh yeah?" Charlie joked. "You got her trained that well?"

Bill shot him a straight look. Then, lowering his eyes, "Kate and I aren't . . . together anymore."

Ah shit, Charlie thought, so that's it. And he did feel like a bastard then. "I'm real sorry to hear that, Bill," he said.

"Yeah. I guess I should have said something before. But . . ."

Crunching his beer can in his large hand he threw it at a wastepaper can. "Damn thing's empty," he said to himself and grabbed another.

Charlie said, "Did you two have a fight while you were up there in that cabin or something?"

"No. No fight. She stayed with her parents in West Virginia."

Both men were quiet.

"Well," Charlie said, "Did she say anything to you? I mean, there had to be something wrong to make her break it off like that." Charlie thought of the last time he had invited them to dinner, their handholding, their silly smirks and laughter, two fools still in love so he thought. "It was pretty sudden," he said.

Bill answered thoughtfully, as if he had spent the whole four weeks up in the woods sorting this situation out and breaking it down into understandable quantities. "Oh," he said, "no. No fight. Nothing wrong, really, I guess. She said she was sorry. That she didn't want to hurt me. All that good bullshit. But that she had to live her own life, that our relationship made her feel stifled. She didn't know if she was in love with me anymore, didn't know what she wanted. All kinds of stuff."

For Bill, this made quite a speech, and Charlie took it in without a word, feeling impotent and incapable of helping his friend. He thought he should reach out to him in some way, think of a magic phrase to turn everything around. But then again, he knew that there were no magic phrases. No wizards, either. "You want another beer?" He offered.

The anger had all drained out of Bill. He sat slouched on the green bucket, looking from his beer to the open window and back. Charlie noticed a hollow pain in Bill's eyes, a gleam with no warmth or sparkle to it. After a moment Bill said, "Well, talking about this is like digging up bones."

"If there's anything I can do . . ."

"I know. The first thing you can do," Bill said, brightening, "is change the damn subject. How's that wife of yours—Emma? She a mother yet?"

"Hell, no. The tests came back last week from the doctor's. Still negative. Our bun in the oven turned out to be another air-biscuit."

"Ah, now Charlie! That ain't doin' much to cheer me up."

"You and me both, Bill. But you asked."

"You could have lied to me. For today, at least."

"Yeah, I could have. But I wish that someone would lie to me sometimes. This is the fourth false alarm in the last two years."

Bill had no response. He stared at his feet. Charlie kept talking anyhow. He, for one, couldn't stand another empty silence. "And the kicker is," he said, leaning over the counter toward Bill, "they said it's my fault. The doctors conclude that I have 'tired sperm.'"

"Tired sperm!"

"Whatever the hell that is. But I think Emma just has rock-hard eggs, is all. She's passing little lead sinkers instead of eggs, and my sperm can't even make a dent in 'em, let alone get through to do business."

Charlie chuckled at this.

Bill managed to raise a smile. "Maybe if you equip them all with little hardhats . . ."

". . . or pick-axes!" And Charlie laughed.

Bill smiled, "Well, if they're so damn tired what makes you think they got the energy to swing pick-axes!"

"Can't you see it?" Charlie said laughing, "Little chain-gangs of sperm breaking up these eggs into little pieces."

"What the hell—you got a weird sense of humor, Charlie. Did I ever tell you that?"

"I'm just saying what you're thinking."

"I was not thinking of sperm with pick-axes!"

"You brought it up."

"You lie. You brought it up."

"So I did, so I did."

There was a lull while they both stopped laughing. Charlie began to say something, but Bill stood up suddenly. He tossed the rest of his beer in the trash. "C'mon," he said.

Charlie gawked at him. "What do you mean come on?"

"I mean come on and help me get my boat. You promised."

"Aw shit! I hope you don't expect me to get myself all muddy on Sunday," he said.

"Oh, you whining baby," Bill said, leading the way to the car.

"I'm already gonna lose half a day of work for this."

"Which means you'll be losing half a day of nothin'. Nobody comes to your shop on Sundays. Especially," he turned to Charlie, "when the goddamn lake is drained."

"They do too!"

"Bull-shit!" Bill got in the driver's seat while Charlie locked the shop. "You protect everything, now, Clyde," he said to the snoozing dog. Clyde wagged his tail drowsily as Charlie shut out his sunbeam.

When both men were in the car, Charlie mentioned that they should get the boat out before the rains hit that afternoon.

“What rain?” Bill asked incredulously examining the blazing blue sky.

“The rain this afternoon. If it hits hard enough, that mud will slide right off the bank and wash away all signs of you or your boat.”

“I don’t think it’ll rain today.”

“Oh yes it will. My hip is aching and my hip is never wrong.”

“Oh, Jesus, your hip!” Bill exclaimed, backing the car up in the gravel to get pointed in the right direction.

“Are you making fun of my old war wound?”

“War wound!” Bill stared at Charlie. “Stop lying to me, and yourself! You broke your hip in high school trying to climb up the lattice-work of Marybeth Somethingorother’s house, like some damn fool outta some movie you saw.”

“Well,” Charlie replied, “Love and war. Same Difference.”

Bill pulled the car onto the two-lane highway and started accelerating up the first long hill. Halfway up, he turned to Charlie as if perplexed. He said, “You know, I just can’t figure out what it was with her.”

“Who?”

“Kate. Who else would I be talking about?”

“I don’t know. I thought maybe . . .”

“I mean, you should have seen her when she told me goodbye. The look on her face; clear, ice-hard. Nothing I said seemed to make any impression on her.” Then, turning back to the road he said, “Heart of fucking stone.”

“No. Not stone,” Charlie said after a moment. “If you try, you can at least chip away at stone.”

swimming

dark
ness
skinny
dipping
in warm, cool
air
floating
inundating
finding its way into
empty
buttonholes of Levis
and pantlegs,
shirtsleeves
cooling
breezes
chill my goose
pimpled skin
warm the touch and
sticky
from your kisses
dark
ness
you
biting
into me,
coming up
for air
again
and again.

Colleen M. Carow

In the Toronto Youth Hostel

This other man is not
so young—
even in this tenuous light I can see
the grey twining into the coarse black;
a weed-thicket spreading and spilling over
his clothes-roll.

He has lain flat-on-his-back still
since I entered the room,
only the thick, calloused feet hanging
over the edge of his bunk shifting
when I knocked over my suitcase;
his breath coming like the chipping
and splintering of stone.

I too lie on my back and watch
the light roll in through the window
and up against the ceiling like pipe-smoke,
the streetcars below dragging along
with a steady shriek that rattles the window
and slowly works his French-language newspaper
off of the chair.

His bed shakes with a searing fit
like coughing up arrowheads
and he kicks his two-dollar sheet off the bed
to lie naked;
his ash grey body sweating against
the vinyl mattress.

Under the glow of my alarm clock,
thick mats of hair cling
to his heaving body
as his head rolls from side to side
like a snake sliced in half.
Another streetcar scrapes along its tracks
and his eyes roll open from under the brow
that hangs like a crude granite lintel.

His body racks with a final
mucous-heavy hack and I close my eyes.
He grumbles something in French
and retrieves his sheet as I press myself
deeper into my mattress.

Shane Farmer

Upon Listening to Clara Schumann

I hear wind.

The leaves, far away, turn and spin
a sound
How could these living things be so tall,
move so much,
and still just whisper to me from afar?

The grass talks to me.
Rather than a whisper, it is a tiny roar,
their bodies clashing against each other.

The earth is quiet, to itself, it
is all the things above it which make the noise.
The earth is quiet.

I turn and spin
the sound shifts.
The whistle turns to whisper turns to whistle.
When I let go
the earth catches me with only a quiet thump.

Richard Gassan

Death of a Sea-God

When Neptune choked to death
On the dinky iceberg that cooled
His Harvey Wallbanger,
I was asked to give the eulogy.
I demurred.
They insisted, strongly.
I accepted.
As I spoke of the guy's great
Complexion and spouted slick praise of
His swimming skills,
I could see them pucker with jealousy.
When I said that playing
Marco Polo would never be
Quite the same without him,
I detected angry mutterings
Seeping toward me.
Finally, when I lambasted him as
A big Sea-Weed Head,
They went nuts and
Tore me from limb to limb,
While I giggled like a school-girl.

Richard Andrade



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