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# Touchstone

*Volume 28*



# Touchstone

**Cover:** Lori Beikman, "Untitled"

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# **Touchstone**

v. 28

1996

Apr.

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*Jonathan A. Small*

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## **Early Rising**

In the green damp of morning I slip stealthily  
into the trout stream—stepping on smooth stones  
creeping slowly through April-cool water,  
past sleeping crayfish and the dragonflies  
that hover detached and nearly weightless.

The swift trout-haunted water surges past  
the smooth moss-slicked stones slowly devoured  
grain by grain and washed to the waiting sea;  
above the trout who wait in cold shadows  
thrown by the roots that trickle into the stream.

Waiting in pools, as slick as eels beneath  
wild irises that sway above their heads,  
below the new-green of trees and handfuls  
of sky, shifting like restless spirits  
to quick take and pluck my soft hair-hooked fly.

*Ben Cartwright*

*Two Poems*

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## Writing Gulls

The brine comes in when water meets the sand.  
At Cannon Beach in Oregon the rain,  
in lines, runs parallel across my hand.

The seagulls scream in hope to understand  
why the tide goes out and why again  
the brine comes. In where water meets the sand

the wind beats on until they all disband,  
their muscles tense and feathers unrestrained  
in lines, run parallel across. My hand

to shield my eyes, I watch their reprimands—  
their dives into the sea again until, again,  
the brine comes in where water meets the sand.

Their wings outstretched, their movements almost fanned,  
their forms are “M”s against the driving rain  
whose lines run parallel. Across my hand

I see them, and I think I understand  
their flight. My words, scratched and written against  
the brine, come in when water meets the land  
in lines run parallel across the sand.

## Walking Through Orchards

My cigarettes,  
their points of acetylene,  
and the way I'd  
tap the ash  
sent Arkansas  
through everything. In October,  
I always see  
my grandfather—  
he'd sit on the red clay  
just like this,  
the grass flossing the teeth  
of broken beer bottles,  
and he'd roll  
the torches with his fingers.  
I'd light them and we'd whisper  
smoking  
          in the dark  
I never once asked  
why he left my grandmother.  
It was as if  
the clay had settled into everything—  
covering our mouths and eyes,  
scrunched between my toes  
like a tightrope.  
Grandpa would roll  
deliberately, each cigarette shaking  
as it passed through his hands—  
and in the silence  
I could have heard a twig snap,  
broken in half.

*Cristina Janney*

---

## **Boxed**

She traced the mortar lines in the exterior brick walls of the elementary school, where the kindergarten room extended out from the rest of the building like a square tumor. The expansion created a small corner that served as a wind block from the first cold Kansas winds that were whipping spirals of dust around her hiding place. She pulled her new gray coat with the pink lining tight around her small, round nine-year-old body. A sand blast of cold wind bit at her chubby white fingers.

She watched the other children play soccer or four-square in the yard, but she did not join. The laughter of the children as they played their games was like quick hands bricking her into her tiny space.

She tried to pretend she was not there. She imagined all the children gone. She began to draw squares in the dirt, tracing them over and over until they dug deep tracks in the hard clay. A dull pain in her head jarred her from her work. A stray soccer ball deflected off her head and was gently drifting with the breeze back toward the yard and the other children. She wanted to pick up the ball and hurl it back, but the shock and shame of the impact paralyzed her.

A short nimble boy in a plaid shirt picked up the ball, bounced it a couple of times and kicked it hard toward the direction of the other children. The children resumed play without notice or concern.

The alarm to end recess sounded and the children reluctantly gave up their play and herded toward the school house door, drawn as by instinct. She shuffled into line behind the other children. Suddenly the children began to push too hard toward the closed door like cattle too eager to cross into the slaughterhouse pen. It would not have seemed strange to her if it was she they turned their backs from in disgust, but it was not. A small black boy was striding across the blacktop field, unhurried, unconcerned with his tardiness.

He had not been playing with the other children. No one had noticed his absence through first period, when the teacher called roll, nor at lunch when his lunch ticket was the last left in the box, nor the empty desk at the rear of the room that was so often silent. But now they all noticed him, here in his own element.

His name was Nikki. He had a rocky little body, which gave him the appearance of a miniature ceramic prize fighter. Nikki put a kid in the hospital for three days once. No one was really sure what happened.



They found Nikki on top of the boy, who was twice his size. The boy was bleeding from multiple wounds to his body and face, and Nikki was pounding the boy's head into the asphalt with the full force of his small, muscular body. It took the principal, an aging janitor, and the only male teacher in school to pull Nikki off the boy.

The boy said Nikki's attack had been unprovoked. Nikki just stood there, staring at the small pool of the boy's blood on the sidewalk. His shiny black skin seemed unscratched, unbruised.

It was rumored that the boy had called Nikki a name, but no one would come forward. The beaten boy's truth was accepted. Nikki was sent home for a week. He lived in a small decaying white house with dirty windows. No one had ever seen Nikki's parents. They had been called to school often, but they never came. Nikki didn't say much after that and stayed away from the other children. It was partly because the children were afraid of him, partly because he also knew that he did not belong.

Nikki was the first of three to be boxed. They placed his desk at the back of the room against the wall and surrounded him with a refrigerator box, so he could not be seen. The box stood upright with the side facing the wall cut out. The top was trimmed so the teacher could reach in and distribute homework or discipline, but the children could not see out.

Teachers also seemed afraid of Nikki. He was not included in games or class discussion. He was often forgotten in his boxed world, but it did not seem to bother him. Nikki came and went from school as he pleased. Sometimes he would be gone for days without being noticed.

Nikki stopped at the jungle gym and peered at the children through the green metal bars. He used one arm to throw himself over the metal cage posing as a play toy, and he landed like a limp rag in the dirt on the other side. She watched with envy the free movement of his body.

The doors to the school swung open, and the children pushed and shoved their way into the long, antiseptic hallway. She stood still like cornered prey. She stared at his yellow eyes and his permanent but seemingly empty snarling smile that showed his gray, rotting teeth. He was not like her. He was unkempt and wild, and something in his grimy smile frightened her. She pulled her coat tight around her body. There was something familiar in her fear like the tentative meeting of old friends.

She had watched him many times from across the school yard as he parted the other children like a farmer treading lightly through rows of corn, but something was different today. Today he was watching her.

"Susan." She was startled by the sound of her own name. She had almost forgotten she existed. She felt a sharp pain in her arm as if she

had been snagged in a snare. "Come on." A bony, white hand attached to a drab, polyester green dress was pulling her down the hall.

The heavy wooden doors were allowed to swing, and she saw Nikki standing on the porch as if in a succession of movie frames. Swish, swish, swish, swish, latch. The bright afternoon sunlight was replaced by the dim shadows of a few fluorescent lights in the corridor. Susan could feel the walls closing around her. She did not fight as the teacher's hand gripped tighter around her wrist, squeezing out all the blood, and then all the pain, until she felt numb all over.

Susan tripped into the room, dragged behind the teacher. There were two other boxes at the back of the room beside Nikki's. The room went from a bright fluorescent white to a soft moist brown as Susan was placed in her box. She had not done anything as heinous as Nikki to win her walls. She was a crier.

She burst into tears for apparently no reason. A misspelled word during the spell off, a broken pencil, a harsh glance from a lunch room monitor and she would be found softly sniffing into her desk. Her parents were called to school to determine the reason behind this awkward behavior. None was found.

The children teased her at first and then ignored her completely. She stopped doing her homework and would not answer in class. She started to fall behind in her work, so it was decided she should be boxed. Teacher said the walls would help her concentrate and minimize the distraction to the other children.

Susan liked the moist darkness. It closed around her like a blanket. She laid her head on her hands and stared at a mimeograph of a grammar worksheet. She knew the answers, but they were locked away in a place she could not reach. There was a picture of a smiling girl with her dog on the top of the worksheet, and she traced the faint purple lines with her pencil as if she might be able to make them real.

The box to her left contained a tall, thin, blond boy. His name was Billy, and his spiky blond hair made him look like a pale porcupine. He lived on a small farm on the outskirts of town. She could still smell the manure on his boots. He talked in a language she could not quite understand. Teacher said he had spent too much time living among beasts.

Billy liked girls. He pulled their long ribboned hair and tried to look up their prim plaid dresses. He chased them around the playground, and once when he had caught one of them, he licked her on the face like a large lap dog. The girl slapped him. He cowered before her like an injured animal. The teacher said Billy was bad, and he was boxed too. From then on, the girls chased him.

Billy never missed school, but occasionally came to school with a large bruise or a black eye. Billy said he got them from breaking wild

horses. When they questioned him about it, he cried, so no one questioned him any more.

The tip of a dirty boot pushed a small piece of ripped paper underneath the bottom of her box. "U wanta suck my dick, bich?" She did not understand but knew it was bad. She hastily stuffed the piece of paper back under the box. A few seconds later, the same piece of paper came under the box. This time it said, "FUCK ME! FUCK ME! FUCK ME!"

She ripped up the paper and brushed the pieces under the box. She went back to tracing the picture on her worksheet. Something wet hit her on the back of the neck. She ignored it. Then there was another twitch in her hair and one on her arm. A barrage of spit balls was raining into her cell. A slobbery one the size of a nickel landed on the desk in front of her. She panicked, kicked her box several times and started to get up. A gaunt white head with a thin, tangled frown appeared at the top opening of the box.

"What seems to be the problem here?" she said in a dry raspy voice. She almost feigned a smile but noticed the unfinished worksheet on the desk. The white bony arm reached into the box. Susan cringed.

"You haven't finished your work," Teacher barked and shook her thin finger in Susan's face. "Stop this nonsense at once. Settle down." And the head disappeared.

She began scribbling on her worksheet. She pressed hard with her pencil. The large circular strokes became tighter and tighter until in a flurry of motion, her pencil snapped. The fragments slipped from her cramped fingers and clattered onto the floor. She focused blankly at a pencil hole in her box. In large script letters were the words HOME SAVER APPLIANCES—WE MAKE HOMES BETTER.

She heard a rustling in the box next to her, and she knew Nikki had finally come home. The limp cardboard wall began to bend and shake, and the tip of a pencil broke through the box's skin. She was amused at first until a yellow, bloodshot eye with a deep, black center peered at her through the hole. She shivered and plugged the hole with an eraser. Another hole appeared to the right and another until they made a half moon. Then two eyeholes were punched to make the pattern of a happy face. Through the pattern she could see an eye, nostril and two large rotten teeth. He gurgled a low maniacal chuckle.

A barrage of wet bombs invaded her space. A fresh dripping had kissed her cheek. A whisper came from Billy's box. "You're a pussy."

She heard a tearing sound. Nikki was using his pencil to rip the seam from one side of her box. She thought she felt herself screaming, but there was no sound as the light from outside invaded her space. She strained until her throat felt dry. Her hands clawed at the walls of her prison, but the walls had turned into large sheets of smooth glass. Her

dry, cracking hands slid down the walls like drops of water on a drinking glass.

"Stop it!" she screamed and pounded with angry fists at the walls of her cage until it collapsed around her.

All the little pencils stopped and pointed.

She was sitting on the floor with her legs sprawled out on top of the flattened walls of her box. The light revealed the thin, green polyester dress attached to the head and hand she had seen before. The hand picked her up off the floor and tossed her limp body back in her chair. Her hand was placed flat on the Formica, and the heavy blow of a board cracked on her fingers.

"Enough, that is just enough of that," the green form screeched.

She laid the orange paddle on the desk of a girl wearing a fuzzy pink sweater and a silky white bow in her long, smooth brown hair. On one side of the paddle was written in black marker W-SHIN—ON SCHOOL. Some of the letters were gone because the board had holes drilled in it to make it sting more when its punishment was inflicted. The girl dared not touch the thing Teacher had put on her desk. She shrank away from it as if it were a large black roach crawling over her new shiny grammar workbook.

Rrreep, rrreep, crack. Teacher tugged on a large roll of gray masking tape to repair the box. The girl in the pink fuzzy sweater glared at Susan as if she were a dirty rag she did not want to dispose of. She scrunched her face and stuck out her tongue. Susan wanted to jump on her, but she seemed so far away, like a distorted reflection in a pool that is destroyed as you break through the surface of the water. Susan had been crying, and Teacher rubbed a rough paper towel all over her face.

"If you don't be quiet, I am going to have to punish you again," Teacher said as she slipped the paddle off the pink sweater girl's desk.

"Do you have any questions about your worksheet?" she said. Her voice had a fake kindness.

Susan lay her head back on the desk, and the walls of her box went up again. She put her head in her arms and sobbed silently until she hugged a reservoir of tears. She tasted the tart cleaning fluid that was used to clean the desks and smelled the ashy pencil lead that had been smeared over it. She sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. Must be quiet. Don't make a sound someone might hear. You can't be found when you are quiet, and if you can't be found, you can't get hurt.

\* \* \*

When the three emerged from their boxes, Teacher said they had to stay after and clean up the spit balls. Billy and she stayed, but Nikki slid out of the room, unafraid and unashamed.

Teacher supervised from behind her compact.

"I hope you've learned something here today," she said as she drew thin red lines on her lips.

Nikki was swinging on the monkey bars when the two children entered the playground. Billy said nothing. He ran as fast as his long bony legs would carry him like a greyhound chasing a stuffed rabbit.

Susan stood in the shadow of a knotted old elm that cast ghastly twisted shadows on the black asphalt field.

She watched him as he climbed on top of the highest bars, stood up straight and beat his chest. He swung down and hung upside down by his legs. The bars cast shadows across his face like a cage, but he spread his lips into a big crooked-tooth grin and said, "Susie, I see you."

Susan shivered. Then slowly, hesitantly stepped from the shadow and smiled. "I see you too."





*Sharon Moreland*

---

## **Mission Avenue Music**

Thump-slide, thump-slide,  
my clawless cat  
scratching on loose wood  
panelled walls. Four bare feet  
patter across the cold  
age-stained yellow  
linoleum floor.

Through the vent metal  
pops and pings chanting  
to the dryer's soft thunder.

The creaks and cracks  
and snaps and pops  
an old house settles  
in while I look  
within for dreams  
to fit the oscillating eek  
of a thousand crickets  
outside my basement window.

*Kimberly Riley*

---

## **Magic**

I am breathing now  
through a tube like a T  
tasting the medicine  
like salt  
as it passes over my tongue  
and into my abused, abusive  
lungs.

Jessica has been here ten days  
in the bed next to mine.  
She entertains me with her magic kit  
as a woman in familiar green  
beats on my back  
and coaxes me to cough up my sickness.

Jessica says she can make the disease disappear.

Jessica teaches me magic,  
says it is all "sleight of hand."  
We deceive the doctors  
and annoy the nurses  
with "Pick a card."

When they tire of our tricks  
and our lips have lost their blue,  
I go home  
to show the welcome party  
how to pull copper coins  
out of nowhere.

*Tracy Abeln*

---

## **I Bet She Kept the Negatives**

When you read this, darling, I will be gone. I don't mean to sound trite or conventional—you've always prided me on being unconventional—but really, it's the only way I could think of to express it. The simplest way. I didn't want to hear you arguing with what I have already decided. If it is *so* decided, then why can't I listen to your protests? Well, because I have already heard them and to hear them again would be a waste of your time. I've considered what you've said. Don't worry, I've left the birds with plenty of water for a couple of days in case you decide to stay away all weekend. I'll be thinking of you—

I read this as Lucy lay at my feet. She was still here in the living room, on the pale carpeting. Still quite here. She was alive. Breathing. She would be fine. I was sitting on our couch in my nightgown watching the eleven o'clock sun come through the window above her, marking out a white rectangle of light around her body from her ears to her hips. The dust particles floated everywhere. She stirred them with her sweet breath; they swirled around her head and spiraled upwards to the ceiling until they left the space of the sun and turned invisible.

I'll remember the time we went to the Gardens. Do you remember eating azalea blossoms? And that old man who said we should be concerned about pesticides? It seems that nothing can grow beautiful and whole drug-free. Shrubbery needs protection from chewing, sucking insects and we too needed protection from the buffets of existence. I remember how you laughed at his yellow-toothed concern and said, "Sir,"—you said "sir" with such flourish, like you were English or some kind of high-bred authority—you said, "Sir, I do not expect that a few grams of bug killer will do us any more harm than this morning's breakfast." Your eyes were dancing. The whole garden was dancing. It was beautiful to see you melting in and out of the flowers. I told you before we left that I didn't think you should wear a flowered dress. I might have lost you in the foliage. But the bus was coming and you said, "We cannot wait for the changing." Get on the

bus, you said. And you stepped up to the curb so that the exhaust hit you hot and full on your bare legs when it pulled in—

She hadn't even finished the good-bye letter. Lucy was so dramatic sometimes; she should have been a writer. I folded the note back up and stuck it between the cushions. Maybe she wouldn't remember it when she woke up. She tried this trick with me before, two months ago when I told her I was moving out. She *couldn't find* another roommate, so I agreed to finish the remaining eight months of our second lease. But I told her things would have to change.

"To hear them again would be a waste of your time." I laughed at her attempt to pin guilt on me—disguised so well as an absolution from any scarlet "G" I might feel obligated to wear. She didn't need my arguments to keep her alive, she had plenty of her own. She knew as well as anyone how to bring a life to a definitive close. Last night while I was out, all she had done in her jealousy was drink vodka until she blacked out. Very effective.

"You don't have to worry about him," I told her sleeping body. Again I pictured last night: Leland sitting across the table from me, in front of empty pasta dishes, picking up the check. I hadn't wanted it to be like that. I told him, "Don't pay for me. Really, it's okay."

He smiled and said, "You'd do the same for me—what are friends for?"

"You don't know that, though, not really." He thought I was teasing.

"Well, would you?"

"Yes," I said with a smile, "of course."

"See, I told you."

But now I felt obligated to repay a favor I would not have initiated. I didn't love him. He was only an acquaintance trying to force more from me by making it look like a deeper friendship.

Lucy groaned and fluttered her eyes several times before opening them fully in my direction. "Adele, you look like an angel." The sun had shifted so it was bathing my chest in white reflection.

"I can assure you I'm not dead." She smiled. I bent down from the couch to her, "Neither are you." I got up and walked into my bedroom to get dressed. "Why don't you clean up your mess in the living room?" I called out, "What if I'm expecting company?"

I heard Lucy get up more quickly than I know she would've if I had still been watching her—she banged her foot on the glass table by the couch and was suddenly at my door. "Are you?" she said, her eyes wide with expectation. They were streaked red like the variegated petunias in our window box.

"What's the difference? I like to keep the apartment clean." I pulled a sweater over my head, shutting her out for a moment. Long enough.

She sighed and left to gather up her glasses and the empty bottle that had left rings all over the tables. I was glad that no one was coming to see me. Saturday hadn't been a holiday since I was sixteen, when my parents decided that since I was legally able, I should get a job. College was a blur of art classes and parties—people were available, and so I let them create the “best years of my life.” Now that I was Miss Charming Smiles all week as a contact at the H. Fowler Public Relations Company, my weekends were for solitude.

When I came out of my room, I smelled eggs cooking in the kitchen. Lucy made pepper-cheese omelets that kept me from becoming a complete vegetarian like many of our friends. I sat at the bar with the *Tribune* to watch her from behind. Her black hair was still frizzled up from her sleeping on the floor. Leland said it looked like steel wool, but I knew it was as soft as combed flax; her slender hands were smooth despite the iodine stains they always had from developer and fix. Dressed in cream-colored leggings and a blue chambray shirt, giving me *food*, she almost made me love her again. The fabric clung to her taut, firm thighs. Underneath, her skin was the color of Spanish peanuts.

“Lucy, I think you should cut down on eggs. You’re gaining weight.” I flipped to find the dates of the Picasso exhibit set to open at the Art Institute. Leland had insisted it was coming at the end of September.

“You eat as many eggs as I do,” she said, folding the omelet over in the skillet with a flick of her wrist. She turned to set two plates in front of me and shot a glance into my eyes. “How was your date last night?”

“I told you it wasn’t a date.” I got up to get some orange juice from the refrigerator. It was gone. There weren’t any cans of concentrate left in the freezer. “God, Lucy, *all* of the orange juice? I swear, you should just learn to drink that shit straight if all you want to do is pass out.”

“Drink coffee.” She laid a perfect omelet on my plate, the other on her own. She sat down across from me and handed me a fork. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep. I was trying to wait up for you to see how your date with Leland was.” She sounded so innocent.

“It wasn’t a date, Lucy. Maybe *you* should get out once in a while—do something besides take pictures. Your vicarious living is leeching me.” I sounded so cruel. She asked me to be quiet—the canary was singing—and just kept cutting and calmly eating.

She had asked me to be quiet when we were at the Gardens too. She had come down with me to St. Louis when I went to visit my father, she’d wanted to take a look at Henry Shaw’s botanical garden to compare it with the one here in Glencoe Park. It was right after we first had met, three years ago. Having been there a dozen times before, I started

to tell her about the man painting irises I had seen one spring, how the bed we were passing had once been a sea of leaping purple, but she wanted me to maintain a holy silence as we walked. Even when we were spending five dollars' worth of dimes for carp food in the Japanese garden, she wouldn't let me speak. Standing close to her on the wooden bridge, I dumped a whole handful of pellets at once into the green water to make the giant goldfish bump into each other, popping their lips, sucking up mouth to mouth in clumsy eagerness to fill their speckled black and orange bellies. The fluid piles of shiny fish kissing each other in repeated accidents—"There's so *many*," I said—but she placed her finger over my mouth, replaced it with a quick kiss of her own and stepped back to snap my picture. Admittedly, breakfast had contained deliberate amounts of extra chemicals that morning, so everything was plastic and hilarious, but without words. She has it all documented in black and white, in photographs she burned out from nothing. She's even sold a few of those. I've never sold anything I've painted.

"Are you finished?" I asked her. She nodded; I took her plate to the sink with mine and rinsed them off. "So, what *are* you doing today, Lucy?"

"Well, I thought you might like to come shopping with me."

I didn't even bother to turn around to answer. "On a Saturday? You've got to be kidding, girl. You're home all week—why do you wait for the weekend when everybody and their mother's out there?"

"I wanted you to come along . . . and I know how busy you are all week at work with clients and everything." She had come over and placed her hands on my waist. "I thought maybe you could help me pick out some new shoes for winter." Her hands were rubbing the wool of my sweater, warm and itchy, into my sides.

"Lucy, you assume too much." I pulled away from her and started out of the kitchen. "I'm sorry, Lucy, I'm busy."

"I thought you said you weren't seeing anyone today, Addie." She was calling after me like a schoolgirl.

"Exactly." I let that sit in the air for a whole second before slamming my bedroom door for punctuation.

When I came out around four-thirty, she was gone. I checked her room to make sure she wasn't just in the closet, making prints. Her clothes were stacked in their neat plush piles on the white steel shelves, her bed was made. The air was silent except for the African parrot rustling at the bottom of his cage by the window. The sky had turned gray like its feathers.

I sat on her bed, on the comforter filled with down and memories. Some people need soft places to lie—like Lucy—she needs to feel warm in the vast darkness of the night. I often wondered why she



needed me. Why she would call out in the fuzzy air of the bedroom—always her bedroom—for me to move closer, to enfold her in my breathing when I was lying right beside her. If I was *with* her, why did she need me to touch her while she was sleeping? Holding her was like holding someone else's child—soft and sweet but not your own—something you have to give back. You are afraid of breaking it, fragile and precious, because it is something you do not want to keep.

The doorbell rang. It was Leland. "Hi, I thought I'd drop by and surprise you," he said, pushing his way into the apartment. "I saw Lucy down at the beach—she told me you were at home." He was dressed in nylon shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt.

"Why don't you take off your shoes, Hon. Would you like some water or something?"

"Thanks." He hopped on one foot as he pulled off a tennis shoe; I could almost hear the sand spilling out on our clean beige carpet. "You know," he raised his voice to reach the kitchen, "if I knew you were free, I'd have called you to come play volleyball with us."

I returned with some iced tea and sat next to him on the couch. "I don't think I could've gotten up that early."

"You could've met us later—looks like it might rain now, though." He took a long drink, letting a few drops fall from his lower lip. He set the glass down with a sigh of satisfaction and turned to me with that "I love myself" smile. "What are you doing tonight—oh, you know that Picasso thing, you were right. It's not coming here until *next* month. We'll have to go check out the dead competition. I'll ask David to get us some passes."

"Yeah, we'll have to go. Dead competition is good competition." I gave him my "I love you smile." "That's still a way's off, though—"

"What about tonight? You wanna go dancing with Alex and me? Leslie's going to be there, she's the one who works at—"

"I'm sorry, I have plans, Leland. Maybe next weekend, okay?" I hoped he wouldn't ask me what I was doing.

"No problem, babe. Listen, I'm gonna use your bathroom." He got up and deliberately walked in front of me instead of just going around the table from his side. "Excuse me, Addie." I guess I was supposed to marvel at his hard calves. I sank back in the cushions and breathed relaxation. It started to rain. Streaked with water, the windows looked like gray stained glass.

"Holy shit!"

I jumped up. "What's wrong?" I found him in the hallway, standing in front of Lucy's room. I didn't see smoke or blood or anything.

"My God, Adele," he said in exaggerated amazement, "she's crazier than I thought."

"What are you talking about?" I was annoyed at his melodrama.

"What am I talking about? *Look.*" One hand on his hip, he gestured wide with the other, as if I had never seen Lucy's room before. "Doesn't she use any other models for her pictures?"

He was referring to her walls, which were almost completely covered with photographs of my face and body. I hardly noticed her walls anymore; it didn't bother me. I knew she had hundreds of other pictures—of other subjects—in boxes underneath the bed. "So what?" I said. At least she was doing what made her happy.

He laughed, "Heh—I just think that's weird, that's all." I followed him back to the living room. "Well, I'm going to head out of here and grab some dinner before your obsessive lover returns." He thought he was joking. He didn't know what Lucy and I had had. He slipped on his shoes without tying them and opened the door himself. "Give me a call sometime, Addie." I smiled warmly enough to melt butter on my forehead and said a sweet good-bye.

The walls were growing dimmer as the light faded with the rain and followed the sun to the other side of the world. I sank into the couch and closed my eyes to speed up the sunset. It was quiet. No coffee pot gurgling for my resident caffeine addict, no crashes from her darkroom, no lousy conversation batted from room to room. The rain had even silenced the birds. All was smooth, empty, and quiet.

Bang—the door swung open against the wall, not five minutes after it had been closed, and Lucy came rustling in with her shopping bags. "*Oh, Addie*, you should have come," Lucy was breathing hard from having taken the stairs. She sat herself on the couch, pulling all of her bags to her feet, and leaned over me to turn on the lamp. She'd rather do that than ask me to flip the switch behind my head. She fell back into her place, her dark hair settling back from the bounce. "There was a wonderful sale at Marshall Field's—you were right though, *lots of people*—"

"You can't afford that stuff even when it is on sale." I was waking up from my trance and growing louder. "You'd better have enough for rent next week. I'm not going to cover for you anymore."

She pulled out a purple velvet dress and laid it across her shoulders and recited, "I know, 'this isn't an equal partnership,' right? You seem to find time every day to remind me of that, Addie." She started to sink into the quiet mood I had lost but then looked down at her purple lap and found her smile again. "Isn't this great? I thought I could wear it this year for Christmas parties. Alice and Rebecca are having New Year's, you know—are you going to be in town for that?"

"I don't know. Do you have to know now?"

"How could you not know, Adele—it's a holiday—either you'll be here or you'll still be at home—"

I got up so she would stop pressing me. "Are you cooking anything tonight?" I lit a candle on the shelf and pretended to distract myself with some books there.

"I don't feel like it really." She was going to try to make me feel bad for not jumping at the opportunity to be her New Year's date. "Let's call in some pizza—maybe we could smoke a little or something. You look really tense." She folded her new dress into a square. "I just got some—"

"Dammit, Lucy, no." I turned to her, the other person in the room, the only other person in the room. "You know I don't do that shit anymore. I can't do that anymore."

"You don't do a lot of things anymore, Adele." I didn't hear any tears coming. "Things used to be wonderful, you know. Two artists in love against the world. Then you suddenly change your mind about 'how it's going to be,' and try and leave me here with a double lease and—"

"Lucy, stop it." I put on the calculating voice, the reasonable voice, cold. "How many times are we going to hurt ourselves around the same circle of argument? It's just the way it is. Accept it. I'm sick of talking about it. Accept."

"You always cut me off, too." She was actually going to get angry. Good. "What I have to say just might be valuable but you can't stand to hear anything bad about yourself, Miss Perfect and Put Together and At-Peace-With-Myself. You're about as at peace with who you are as someone who just sold her soul for an egg-salad sandwich!" She rose to pick up the phone. I couldn't believe her audacity.

"I don't want any goddamn pizza, Lucy."

"I'm not ordering pizza, Adele. You *assume* too much," she said. "I'm calling Marissa. I ran into her shopping and she asked me to dinner. I told her 'no,' but I changed my mind." She dialed.

"Glad to see you finally leaving." I was supposed to be hurt by the fact that she "changed her mind." I walked into my room and shouted "have fun" over my shoulder. I think I heard her say "thanks."

Everyone busy with other things, no one needed me for company or approval. I changed back into my nightgown and sat on my bed to read. I fell asleep for a little while until Lucy slammed the door to leave. My windows were pitch black. The rain had stopped. I walked out to the living room and saw the mantle clock. One in the morning. Maybe Lucy was just getting back. What a way for me to waste my time alone, by sleeping.

Then I saw her letter sitting on the couch. I guess she found it when she came in tonight. Maybe she and Marissa had been sitting there together while I was sleeping—they must have been getting a little wild to dig up a letter from the couch cushions—and they slammed the door

when Marissa left. I was surprised Lucy hadn't invited her to sleep here. I walked over and picked up the letter to throw it away, but I noticed that something was written on the back. I flipped on the light and read:

Parallel construction is desired in writing, isn't it, Adele? Then how about this: when you read this, I will be gone. I was talking to Marissa and we decided that you're not good for me, that you are full of bitterness that I don't need polluting my photography or my heart. I'm starving right now, we never quite made it to dinner—ha ha, don't get any ideas—we were packing my clothes and photography stuff. It's an odd intoxication to be writing with such hunger.

Just like that—I'm leaving. Don't worry, with all of your friends, I'm sure you can find someone to live there with you. Until you do, I'll keep up my share of the rent. Noble of me, isn't it? And I've left the birds with plenty of water in case I don't come back to pick them up this weekend. I've got to tell you, though, I've never felt so free. I know this is what you want, so I know you will be happy. It's okay that you fell out of love with me. I'm sorry it took me so long to see it. Love always, Lucy.

Just like that. Right. I couldn't believe what ridiculous lengths she was going to go to make me want her again. At least she wasn't playing dead. Hungry now too, I went to the kitchen to make a sandwich. The coffee pot was gone. She must have moved it to her bedroom to scare me. She couldn't live without me. There was no way she could have fallen into Marissa so quickly. After all of her dove-like pleas these past weeks—"why don't you love me anymore," "I need you, Adele," "you inspire me"—she wasn't capable of letting the batting lashes of someone that new seduce her.

"Lucy," I started to march loudly toward her bedroom, "Lucy, I can't believe you! This shit has got to (I flipped on her light—how angry I was going to play) stop. I'm tired of your childish games." But my words rang into an empty room. Lucy's bed was stripped, her clothes were gone from their shelves, the closet doors hung open exposing nothing but a naked sink. The parrot blinked at me. I sat down on the bare bed and stared at the walls. In the artificial light, a thousand pictures of myself glared back at me.

*Kiersten Allen*

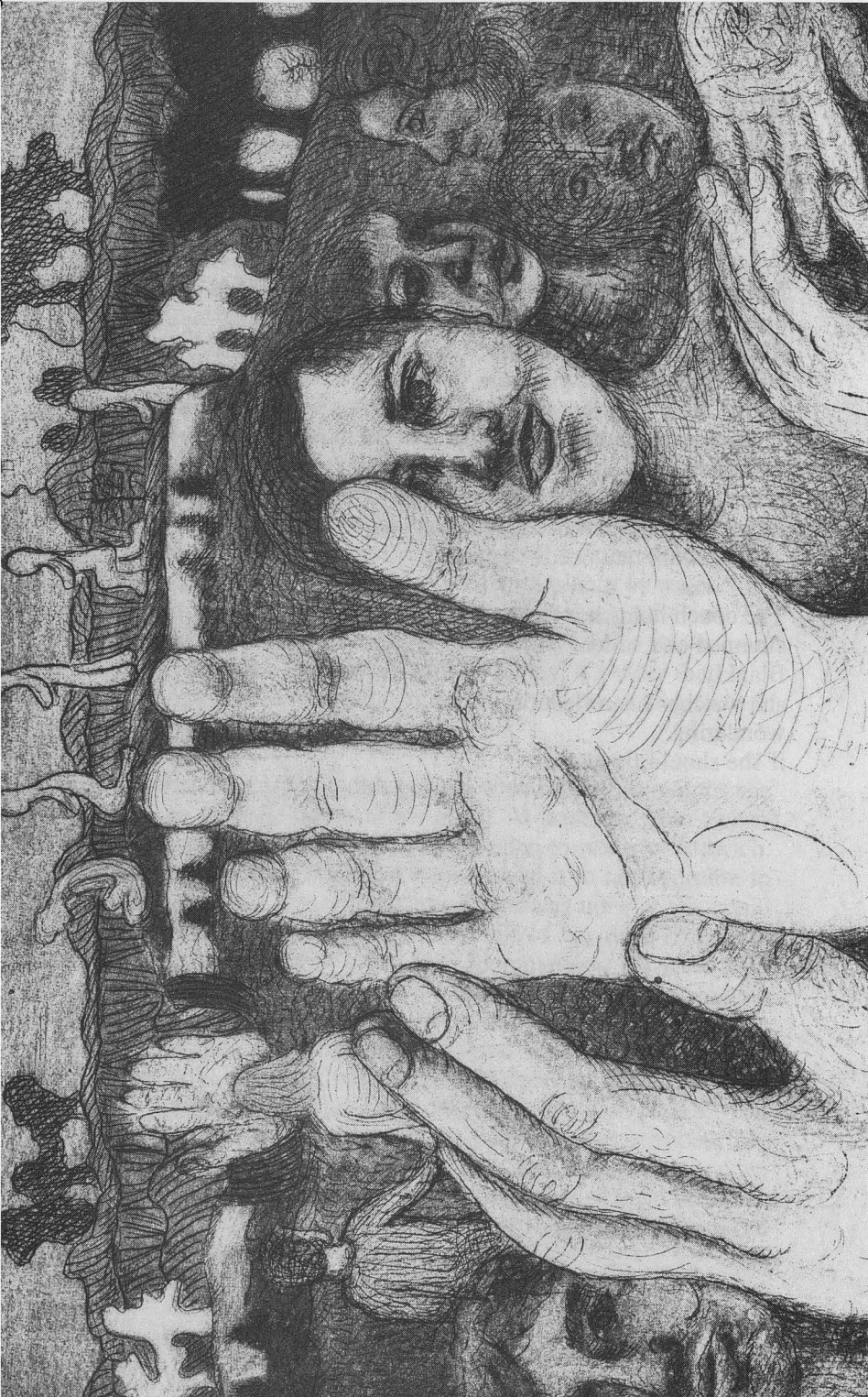
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## **Dividing Line**

Nothing moves as the music  
drowns out the silence, that buzz.  
The blank television screen  
holds the secrets of the room.

The front door stands open  
with him  
perched on the porch  
facing the yard that needs watering  
and the walk that needs sweeping.

The couch holds her  
slumped and sullen.  
Blankly,  
she watches his reflection  
wondering  
if she should fix supper.





*Kris Steward*

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## **Virgin Mary**

Dromedary pelt draped  
across the domain. Drupe and drink  
at his side,  
Joseph lay smiling,  
palm pressed  
against  
my breast.  
I slept. The sun had set  
and set. My belly stretched.  
When asked by others, “a celestial gift,”  
I said,  
taste of wine still fresh  
upon  
my lips.

Keely Schields

## The Stigma

Hoo clicked off her light and lay down in bed listening to the steady breathing of the sleepers in the huge antiseptic room they all shared. How was it they slept through the night so effortlessly when she had scarcely closed her eyes since her arrival into Positive Care-Oberlin, Kansas, nearly a month ago? Night made it difficult—especially nights like this one. Whenever it got dark and quiet, her sense of being caught in some weird dream intensified. It was unearthly how the air conditioner whispered in the room while the July humidity brushed at the windows of the Asymptomatic Wing. She felt like waking Mutha to ask him if this was real, but she knew he wouldn't exactly appreciate that.

It had seemed like a good idea. Before Implementation two years ago, it was estimated that three million Americans were Positive. The disease continued to spread like a spark in a pile of dry leaves despite any safe-sex pep talks or half-assed research. *But what if*, Somebody asked, *what if you noticed some sort of mark on the right hip?* Would you still have sex with the person? *What if there was a kind of tattoo on the left forearm?* Would you still share the needle?

Would you have anything to do with the person?

Hoo gazed at the tattoo on her own forearm. It wasn't so ominous; all it meant at the moment was that she was going to live out her days at some funky hospital in Oberlin, Kansas. That wasn't part of the original Plan. Nobody ever said a strip of rural towns in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma would turn into a sick belt where they sent you if you bore the tattoo. When Congress passed the Bill, the media told everybody it was merely a measure to stifle the spread of the epidemic, as no cure or vaccine was in sight. Funny thing, Hoo didn't recall the media making a very big deal of the whole Idea, except to say it was a good one. There was such unanimity. *The New York Times* liked it. *Newsweek* liked it. "Crossfire" liked it (they just argued about which tattoo was better—the hip or the forearm?). People liked it. This was the solution to a problem which was beginning to panic the common citizen.

Mutha, who was snoring in the next bed, insisted to Hoo that he had never been fooled. He was always telling Hoo she wouldn't fit here if it weren't for those tattoos on her ass and her arm, and she tended to agree. Her Positive Status had come as a shock. This wasn't a test she

would have had done of her own accord, but then it became Mandatory. What on earth would she have had herself tested for? Hoo's sexual encounters, which totaled two, had both disgusted her, and she'd never dreamed of using any kind of drug, much less one that required a needle. When it became a requirement for every man, woman, and child to get tested once a year, she had been a spinster-like high school math teacher who went along because, hey, it was the law. At no point after either of her tests did she even remotely suspect the results would come back Positive. The one in the first year came back Negative, and the one in the second year didn't. So Somebody called her in to get a couple of tattoos—something else she never thought she'd get. Now the pair of marks were her common denominator; everybody she spoke with at any length had them too.

"Hoo?"

She jumped. "Oh. Hi, Mutha."

"Heard you thinkin' again. What's on your mind?"

"You know," she said with a shrug, "same ol' same ol'." What the hell is going on? How can this be happening? This isn't Nazi Germany, you know."

Mutha, who had been hovering over the side of her bed, sat down Indian style at the foot. He was a difficult person to be around, because he carried this unrelenting intensity wherever he went. Even so, Hoo liked him, liked his face. She saw wisdom there.

"No, it's not Nazi Germany. It's a lot worse. A lot more people are a lot more scared, and it got out of hand in a lot bigger way." He paused for a long moment, wrinkling his brow. "Ever heard of that sociologist Milgram?"

She nodded.

"That's what this is. Give some uncomfortable people an authority figure, and they'll do anything he says. No matter what. You were following the leader, too, till they put those tattoos on you."

She hated it when he was right. "You have to admit, though, it's keeping the disease from spreading so fast . . . and granted, this sucks, but they're taking care of us."

"My ass. There aren't any fewer people coming in here every day than there were a year ago. Some folks have money and connections and a vial of their Guatemalan maid's blood, and they're fucking like bunnies. Then They send *us* here to die, not to be taken care of. They give us placebos and support groups, but they never take our blood when we get sick. It's tainted, and it scares Them. You do realize we'd be lined up and shot like lame horses if our blood didn't scare Them so much."

"They should kill us. Anything but this, this mark that takes away everything I've ever done. Nothing else matters about me. That's just

a little hard to swallow.” Hoo started to cry quietly, as others were sleeping.

Mutha reached out with a tattooed arm and touched a tear, which he proceeded to wipe on his own cheek. “I know. You don’t fit here, but then again I suppose you do. They may have put these marks on us, but they didn’t cut out our tongues out. We can still talk.”

“Talk.”

And he did while she fell into a shallow sleep.

The next morning Hoo awoke later than usual for those nights she slept. Everybody else from the room was evidently up and gone. Inevitably, the thought fled across her mind that she was becoming worn down, sick. She dismissed it with a shake of her head, then dropped her feet to the cold tile floor, and headed toward the communal shower pit. There, Hoo found herself nearly knocked flat by the industrial strength lemony freshness. Oh well, clean anyway.

She showered with only one other person, a man called Marc, whose budding erection was difficult to ignore. At any rate, he merely nodded in greeting to her, as if he were completely unaware. Hoo, on the other hand, had salvaged some shred of modesty, which caused her to shower quickly and get out even before Marc had finished. Although it was no simple thing to become accustomed to, she realized the distinction which mattered in Positive Care was not male/female, but Asymptomatic/Symptomatic. Neither Hoo nor Marc displayed symptoms of any kind. So there existed labels even among the labeled.

After dressing in the uniform of lightweight white cotton shorts and T-shirt for summertime (as if there were a difference in here), she left the Sleeping Quarters. Walking out the door, she nodded to the watching Caregiver, who clenched his jaw in response. *Boo!* she thought with a grin.

Through many winding halls dotted with Caregivers, she finally arrived at the combination Cafeteria and Recreation Area. It was a vast room with glass walls, into which the morning sun shone brightly. Almost a cheery room, except it only made her long for the outdoors.

Hoo spotted Mutha across the room with his usual group of listeners. Basically, that’s what they did all day—talked and listened, waited to get sick and die. Sometimes they watched TV, but there were simply ninety-six channels of reruns. Take your pick. She picked up a bagel and a glass of orange juice and went to join the group. In the circle sat Mutha, Coor, Thyme, and Marc, who had somehow beaten her there. Several others sat or lay on couches near the circle, clearly eavesdropping.

Mutha was spouting off. “. . . the thing is, they never needed to put these damned tattoos on us. I knew I was Positive long before any of this came about, and everybody I knew knew it, or they suspected as

much.” He paused as Hoo pulled a chair into the circle. “Good morning, Hoo. Sleep well?”

“As always. Thanks, Mutha.”

“Not a problem.” He smiled briefly. “Like I was saying, most of ‘em were scared and hated me then. You all came straight to Positive Care pretty quick after you got tattooed. When I got tattooed right off, I spent almost a year out in the real world, and it was like they suddenly had something tangible to be scared of and hate. I never took my jacket off at work all through June and July before they canned me, and I mean, people were just going absolutely nuts to know if it was really there. We’d have overdraft meetings in the morning, and the whole fucking table would just sit there staring at my left sleeve. They were so scared of me.”

“Just like my babies,” added Coor, staring blankly at the wall.

At this, Hoo placed a trembling hand on the sad woman’s knee. To her pleasure, it was received with Coor’s own comforting hand.

Nobody knew what to say for a moment. Then Marc, who looked pale, asked, “Is this place any better than the real world? Personally, I think it blows—TV and leisure time or not.”

Thyme shook his head. “I don’t know. I guess I’m sort of ambivalent about the whole situation. There’s a certain comfort—maybe even pride—in being surrounded by my fellow stigmatized. If only somehow you could escape all the funny looks. Check out that Caregiver by the door.” Everyone turned to look. “Not everybody here is an eternally damned faggot like me, but he thinks so. We’re nothing but a bunch of badges of sin to him, and I hate that.”

“Jesus, what are we gonna do? There’s nothing but waiting, day in and day out. Always the same thing. Sometimes I wish I could just snap my fingers and die whenever I pleased.”

“So do They,” said Mutha firmly. “They wish you’d hurry up and kick the bucket, so don’t lay down for Them. It’ll come soon enough. Somewhere along the line, Somebody got sick of spending money to do research and thought it’d be better to slap a sticker on us that people would loathe. That badge just made sending us here to die that much easier. They’re trying to bury this disease with us.”

Thyme shrugged. “Yeah, I know.”

“He’s just saying it hurts, Mutha,” Hoo said. “It hurts to have your life stripped from you. Two days. That’s all I had to shut down my life and go. You’ve all been here a lot longer than me, but I already miss my life. It wasn’t much, but it was mine.”

“What do you miss, honey?” asked Coor.

“I miss the city lights at night in Manitou. That’s where I’ve always lived. My parents’ house is in the foothills of the Rockies, and I remember being little and seeing all of Colorado Springs lit up below when

I'd look out the window before I went to bed. And then I'd take my glasses off and the lights all ran together and the moon looked like a parachute. Then my dad would read me Dr. Seuss . . . 'The Sneetches' usually."

"Is that the one where some of them have stars on their bellies and some don't?" Thyme asked grinning from ear to ear.

Coor nodded. "'Stars upon thars.' My kids love that story. I used to read it to them all the time. Huh." She closed her eyes briefly. "I'm bored with death and wondering how we got here. Let's talk about 'Sneetches' and things."

Nobody had a problem with that. None of them had anywhere to go or anything else to do, so they talked the rest of the morning and through the afternoon, too, about relatively lighter things. At one point, they took an intermission to watch "The Brady Bunch," because it was the episode where Marcia won't leave the house because the boys had fired a football into her nose. Only Marc was unusually quiet during all this. After watching TV, the others hardly noticed that he hadn't recircled with them.

They noticed when he screamed. Marc had been sleeping on one of the sofas which was now soaked with sweat, as were his T-shirt and shorts. Two Caregivers were struggling to lift him into a wheelchair, but Marc wouldn't be subdued. Mutha ran over there in a flash and ripped one of the Caregiver's hands from Marc's sweaty shirt.

"Get the hell off him!"

"Take it easy, buddy. I'm just doing my job. This guy's sick."

"You can't do this. I won't let you take him."

The other Caregiver, who was much larger than the first, shoved Mutha to the floor. "You ain't stoppin' nothin'. We're takin' your boy-friend over to Symptomatic, and there's nothin' you can do about it."

While Mutha's face deepened from red to purple, the two Caregivers managed to ease Marc into the wheelchair. Hoo could only stand there like an idiot as they wheeled him out. It had happened altogether too quickly. Suddenly, her stomach twisted and swam as she wondered what was going to become of Marc. Who knew what went on in Symptomatic?

Marc looked like a zombie as he was pushed out. Hoo didn't think he heard Mutha walking alongside him, saying, "It's gonna be all right, Marc. We'll come see you. We'll get you back."

Marc's left arm hung limply over the side of the wheelchair, palm side up, so the tattoo bounced lightly for all to see. They never saw him again.

Since the removal of Marc, two sleepless nights and two especially boring days had passed for Hoo. Mutha was taking it pretty hard; he

had barely spoken since the incident, and Hoo missed his voice sorely. As for Coor and Thyme, they were functioning only slightly better. In lieu of sitting dejectedly in a corner as Mutha did, they had become bona fide “Gilligan’s Island” junkies, surfing through the channels after each episode to find it on yet another. Hoo, for one, could hardly think for the theme song endlessly running through her mind, but nobody else appeared to care what they watched. Maybe they were tired of thinking.

Now, at long last, Hoo found herself lying in bed dozing off in spite of the eerie white moonlight pouring through every window. It was pure fatigue acting. For some reason, she felt strangely at peace.

“Hoooooooo,” someone whispered in a dream. She turned away from the voice, but it tugged at her. “Hoo, wake up.”

She opened her eyes and found Mutha’s anxious face not more than an inch from her own. “Hoo, we’re getting out of here.”

“What?”

“We’re getting out. Me and Thyme and Coor. We want you to come.”

“We can’t.”

He placed a cool hand on her cheek. “Now we can. One of the Caregivers left his security card on a table in the Rec, and I picked it up.”

When Hoo lifted her head slightly, she noticed Thyme and Coor behind Mutha. She was still a little confused. “Where will we go?”

“Somewhere else. Come on, get dressed.”

Although she thought the idea sounded ridiculous, Hoo slid out of bed. While she changed, the others’ eyes darted about the room, scanning for any movement other than the rise and fall of the sleepers’ chests. Everyone’s flesh looked milky in the moonlight, except for the occasional harsh flash of a tattoo.

Then the four of them were creeping toward the doorway of the Sleeping Quarters. When Thyme poked his head through it, Hoo felt certain her thudding heartbeat would give them away, but the Caregiver at the door was fast asleep, snoring to beat the band. The padding sound of their slippers also seemed awfully loud to her as each of them slipped across the threshold.

Mutha turned right and led them to a door at the far end of the hall, where a small box with a flashing red light hung. To Hoo’s relief, it didn’t beep but merely shone green when Mutha slid the card through. He opened the door and they descended a flight of stairs into a curving tunnel of sorts.

“What is this, Mutha?” she whispered.

“It’s the tunnel from the garage. This is the way they brought me in my first day.”

On and on it went. Just when Hoo thought they had surely made a complete circle back to where they had begun, they came to a different flight of stairs. This they ascended to yet another red flashing light. Mutha whipped the card through, then opened the door to the muggy night air.

Everyone was dumbstruck, because none of them had taken a breath of the outdoors in at least a month. Even the exhaust stench of the open garage was welcome. When Hoo immediately felt the droplets of perspiration condensing on her nose, she couldn't help but laugh in wiping them off. The others laughed softly, too, for around them were nothing but wheat fields as far as the eye could see.

"I don't believe this," she said in amazement.

Coor shook her head. "That was almost too easy, don't you think? There has to be something more keeping us here—some electrical fence or a watch tower."

"There could be," replied Mutha, "but I really doubt it. They probably never thought anybody would have will enough to try and get out. One way to find out, I guess."

"Which way?" asked Thyme.

Mutha pointed at the full moon hanging low in the sky. "That way."

With that, he began walking and all followed trustingly. They quickly emerged from the cover of the garage into the night. It wasn't long before they entered a wheat field, and Mutha's eyes turned red and puffy. Still, he insisted he was fine, and they continued. The wheat stood thick and dry and nearly chest-high on Hoo. It tickled her, and the sickly sweet smell was overwhelming. How long had they been walking through it when they finally came to the hulking Massey-Ferguson resting close to a country road—fifteen minutes? an hour? two? Hoo had lost track.

Mutha thought they should turn right and follow the road, which they did. Walking four abreast, they filled the narrow strip of gravel almost completely. Hoo couldn't imagine two cars would fit past each other if they should happen to meet on the road. Any glow from Positive Care soon faded, leaving only the moonlight. Together they walked in virtual silence. Whether it was from shock or pleasure, no one could say.

At length, the group happened upon an small body of water. Mutha veered over toward it and stopped. "How about a moonlight swim, guys? Aren't you supposed to be some sort of swimming champ, Hoo?"

"Mutha," she objected, "it's a tailwater pit."

"So?"

"So, it's contaminated with pesticides and fertilizers and God knows what else."



Thyme agreed, "She's right, Mutha. And besides, we have no kinda time for this."

"Whadda we care?" Mutha shouted merrily. Before Hoo knew it, his palm was planted in the small of her back, and she was sent flailing into the water.

"Asshole!"

Coor and Thyme were bent double with laughter, but Mutha only grinned as he stripped off his T-shirt, shorts, and slippers. Hoo watched the tattoo on his right cheek freeze for a moment in mid-air like a ball that has reached the peak of its ascent before falling; then he landed near her in the water, creating a colossal splash. When he surfaced, she proceeded to dunk his dripping head back under the water.

"See how you like it!"

Mutha came up again and hugged Hoo tightly to him. Then he beckoned to Coor and Thyme. "Come on in, you two. The water's fine."

"What the hell?" Coor began stripping and Thyme followed suit. Meanwhile, Hoo removed her own clothing and tossed it over the water's edge.

Then there were four of them—swimming in a tailwater pit. Hoo thought she had never enjoyed anything so thoroughly. Everything was quiet and white under the moon, and the water cooled her skin pleasantly. She liked being held by Mutha, liked the pressure. It chilled her, and she reeled next to him. More than this, however, she liked watching Thyme and Mutha pressed close together while she clung to Coor. And she liked the four of them all joined in a tight embrace. They hung on to one another, tears of disbelief or release mingling with rancid water droplets, until hanging on became too much of an exertion.

Then headlights, incoherent shouts, a deafening noise, confusion. Mutha's body stiffened momentarily, and the water turned red. Hoo pulled his weight up as he sank. To the horror of all three, Mutha's face was no longer his own. It was a foreign mass of moonlit blood and missing fragments, and they cried out together.

Suddenly there were two figures at the edge of the water to go with the voices. "See," said the one with the gun, "I told ya I saw the tattoos on 'em. They all got 'em."

"Christ! What if it hadn't a been? Besides, that's exactly why ya shouldn't a shot. Now that water is all polluted with that guy's blood."

"Well, what do ya suggest we do?"

"They obviously came from Oberlin. It ain't far from here. Go to the truck and get on the CB and tell 'em what we found."

The gunman disappeared for a moment before he returned and said, "They said we should bring 'em back."

"In *my* truck?"

"Put 'em in the trailer, I guess."

"All right. Hey, you three! Come on out of there!"

All were too stunned to move for a moment. Finally, Thyme, then Coor, began to paddle their way toward the edge. Hoo, however, could not accept what had apparently just happened. Where were the other two going? They couldn't just leave Mutha there. When she started following, she grasped Mutha's limply floating hand and pulled him with her.

"Shit, lady! What do ya think yer doin'?"

"I can't leave him here," pleaded Hoo. "He'll drown by himself."

Coor swam back and tried to release Hoo's death grip from Mutha's hand. "Honey, let it go."

"No!"

Coor's voice became maternal. "Hoo, relax. Mutha's gonna stay and swim a while."

"He is?"

"Yes, let him be." Hoo's grip on Mutha then loosened on its own. Her entire body relaxed visibly, and it was fortunate Thyme had swum back to support her by the waist. They struggled to the edge and onto the dirt, where they were ordered at gunpoint to get into the back of the truck. The gun was clearly no longer so much a threat as it was an instrument to keep them at a distance. Naked and shocked, they climbed into the bed of the truck, and the tailgate slammed shut behind them. At last, the engine roared to life and they were carried swiftly back to where they belonged.

Two weeks later, Hoo sat in the Rec flipping channels, searching desperately for another episode of "Hogan's Heroes." However, this was the Rec on the other side of the center, the one in Symptomatic. Hoo recalled vaguely what had occurred a few weeks earlier, yet she still looked for Mutha from time to time, usually at night. Because she had refused to sleep since her return, she had become chronically fatigued. Her eyes had taken on the appearance of a couple of finger-greased marbles in two dirty hands. Because she had refused to eat as well, she had shown a loss of over twenty pounds when she was weighed two days ago. That was when she had been transferred. As it turned out, Symptomatic was really not much different from Asymptomatic, except everyone over here was even more pathetic. Hoo hated it, though. On this side, they received the afternoon sunshine, but it never seemed to burn through the cloud of dying that hovered in the room. It loomed thick and stunk of sickness and lemony disinfectant. Under its revealing light, she no longer saw a tattoo on anyone when she looked; she saw a stigma of imminent death.

When Hoo had finally located “Hogan’s Heroes” on channel sixty-seven, she was approached by a Caregiver and a fellow who looked like he should be in the Secret Service. “Excuse me,” he said curtly, “Hoo Claire Wilson?”

She shrugged and turned back to the television.

“I really think you might want to listen to this,” the man persisted.

“Talk,” she croaked without looking away from the TV.

“All right. I’ve been asked to inform you that there was an error in identification of the test in which you were reported Positive. Considering your sexual and medical history, combined with the status of blood which we now believe to be yours, we consider it probable that you are actually Negative. Given that the Symptoms you now display are not specific, we’d like to conduct another test. Should it, in fact, turn out Negative, we will, of course, authorize a plastic surgeon to remove the tattoos.”

Hoo shook her head slowly. Suddenly, she saw Mutha, felt him sitting next to her on the sofa. He was telling her she’d never really belonged there, but then again, maybe she had. This struck her as extremely hilarious, and she broke into a maniacal laugh. Soon Mutha was laughing, too. They laughed and laughed. They laughed so hard, Hoo’s side ached, and her face turned a frightening shade of blue.

“Are you all right?” asked the Caregiver.

Hoo nodded, still whooping.

“What, may I ask,” inquired the Secret Service type, “is so funny about all this?”

She collected herself enough to reply, “You . . . think you can wipe it off.”



*Jennifer Bergen*

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## **Thoughts of Great-granddaughter at the Viewing of the Body**

She was always very tiny.  
As though one day long ago her body had somehow  
seeped inside herself.  
Even her bones were thin  
and so light you could almost hear them  
crackling as we lifted her out of the chair  
into the car, or back to her chair again.

Her eyes, the only things that didn't shrink,  
filling her face, large and unremitting,  
seizing the words said too fast to comprehend  
as if she could see them floating in the air.

The way she always moved her mouth  
sucking her cheeks in, smoothing her dentures,  
until I would turn to her and say  
something, so that she would respond—  
“Yes,” she would say,  
a slow sound drawn out over fields  
that blurred by outside the window.

Her face today seems like nothing,  
colorless as overboiled vegetables, or clay  
and I feel that if I were to touch her cheek  
it would leave a dent, a hole with my fingerprint.  
I stare at her closed eyelids.  
They seem to have sunken in now  
like the rest.  
I remember once, on a trip, I told a story  
(too quick for her to hear)  
but she watched as I laughed out loud  
and then she giggled.

*Jennifer L. Johnson*

*Two Poems*

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## **Running the Konza**

The final soft blush of dusk  
rises from the crimson-heart grasses,  
rushing about my legs,  
and the swells of wind  
slip into a sleep, so deep  
it is almost forgotten in the stiff reeds.  
Someone has cast a perfect drop  
of silver in the sky,  
but evidence of his careless splatters,  
like mine, are scattered about, and their shimmer of  
brightness barely catches the faint edges  
of rocks that threaten to throw me  
at the crest of the slope.  
The strangely still prairie grasses  
are brown flamingos, standing alert  
at the trail's edge and scratching reprisals  
at my clumsy legs, while somewhere  
the wailing howls of a  
coyote play a mean game  
with the rhythms of my heart.

## Last Evening at Westerbork

"We should be willing to act  
as a balm for all wounds."

Final entry from the diary *An Interrupted  
Life*, by Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum, who  
died at Auschwitz on November 30, 1943.

The bitter flush  
of twilight reaches its fluid fingers  
through the barrack windows  
and pools on the ice-crust ed earth  
beneath your feet.  
You are bent with work, pencil and fist  
pressing hard  
against the ridge of your brow,  
dark eyes turning inward,  
denying the black light,  
still seeking,  
as though the collapsing rot  
of your tired body  
could be your savior now.  
Tomorrow, you will step  
onto the platform of a train  
packed with human bodies  
and paper mattresses for the sick,  
and wave once from Wagon No. 12,  
your thin hand reaching  
through wooden slats,  
as you confront the steaming irons.

*Kevin Owens*

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## Marriage to Vengeance

When I got the invitation to Corey's wedding—elegantly embossed, archaically formal (the ceremony, it stated, would take place at “one o'clock”)—the first thing I did was the TV Guide crossword puzzle. I was not so much surprised by Corey getting married as I was by him inviting me. I wondered what would motivate a person like Corey to ask his former lover, a man he had lived with for a year and a month and whose heart he had suddenly and callously broken, to a celebration of his union with a woman?

I decided to call Kyle, who had been a close friend of Corey's and mine during the days when we were together, and who always seemed to have answers. “Kyle, Corey's getting married,” I said when he picked up the phone.

“If you ask me,” Kyle said, “he's wanted a woman since day one. Remember that lesbian he tried to make it with? She said she wanted to change, have kids and all?” He paused ominously. “It's not she, is it?”

I looked at the invitation. “Antoinette Burnedette Valenteen,” I said.

“Well, for her sake,” Kyle said, “I only hope she knows what she's getting into. As for Mr. Corey, his doings are of no interest to me.”

“But, Kyle,” I said, “the question is: should I go to the wedding?” imagining myself, suddenly, in my red T-shirt that said Baby Butch (a present from Corey), reintroducing myself to his thin, severe, long-necked mother, Marjorie Winters.

“I think that would depend on the food,” Kyle said.

After I hung up, I poured myself some coffee and propped the invitation in front of me to look at. First things first: we were lovers, and I don't mean schoolboys touching each other in exploratory ways in dormitories after dark. I mean we lived together, shared underwear and toothpaste, had one bed to sleep in, and for all the world (and ourselves) to see. Corey was in law school in Kansas City, and I had a job at Wesley Hospital in Wichita (I still do). Each day I'd drive approximately two hours there and two hours back, and when I got home Corey would be waiting for me in bed, a fat textbook propped on his lap. We had a couple of friends, Kyle and Callie, for instance, and we were always invited to things together. When he left me, we were even thinking about getting power of attorney over each other. I was Corey's first man lover, though he had plenty of girlfriends. I had never slept



with a girl, but I'd had sex with boys since early high school. Which meant that for me, being gay was just how things were. But for Corey—well, from day one it was adventure, event and episode.

After we became lovers, though, Corey had cut his mustache off and bought me the Baby Butch T-shirt. He joined all sorts of groups and organizations, dragged me to unsavory bars and insisted fiercely on telling his parents everything. (They did not respond well.) Only in private did he muse over his other options. I think he thought he was rich enough not to have to take any vow or promise all that seriously. Rich people are like that, I have noticed. They think a love affair is like a shared real estate venture they can just buy out of when they get tired of it.

The next day was the day of the wedding, and somehow, without hitting any children, I drove to the hotel in Lenexa where the ceremony and reception were taking place. A doorman escorted me to a private drawing room where, nervous about being recognized, I kept the wedding gift which I had bought, costing me an arm and a leg, in front of my face as long as I could. I bought him the ultimate—a Cuisinart—which I had wrapped in white crepe paper with a huge yellow bow. An elderly woman with a carnation over her breast, apparently an aunt or something, said, "May I take that, dear?" I had to surrender the Cuisinart to a table full of presents, some of which were hugely and awkwardly wrapped and looked like human heads. I thanked her, suddenly naked in my shame, and steadied myself to brave the drawing room where the guests milled. I recognized two or three faces from college, all part of Corey's set—rich, straight, preppie, not the sort I had hung around with at all. And in the distance I saw his very prepared parents. His mother thin and severe-looking as ever in a sleeveless black dress, her neck and throat nakedly displaying a brilliant jade necklace, while his father, in his tuxedo, his streaked hair cut short, like Corey's, talked with other men and puffed at a cigar. Turning to avoid them, I almost walked right into Meridith Bevins, who was Corey's gay best friend, or "fag hag," in college. We were so relieved to see each other. We grabbed a couple of whisky sours and headed to as secluded a corner as we could find.

"Boy, am I glad to see a familiar face," Meridith said. "Can you believe this? Though I must say, I never doubted Corey would get married in anything less than splendor."

"Me neither," I admitted. "I was just a little surprised that Corey was getting married at all."

"Weren't we all?" Meridith said. "But she seems like a neat girl. A professor of course. Very cute, a real shame that she's heterosexual, if you ask me. But apparently he loves her and she loves him, and that's just fine. Look, there she is."

Meridith pointed to a pretty, athletic woman with silky blond hair who stood in the middle of a circle of elderly women. To my horror her eye caught ours, and she disentangled herself from the old women and walked over to where we were sitting. "Meridith," she said. Then she looked at me and said, "Nicholas?"

I nodded and smiled.

"Nicholas, Nicholas," she said and reached out a hand which, when I took it, lifted me from the safety of my sofa onto my feet. "It is such a pleasure to meet you," she said. "Come with me for a second. I've wanted a chance to talk with you for so long, and once the wedding takes place—who knows?"

I smiled nervously at Meridith, who raised a hand in comradeship, and was led by the bride through a door to an antechamber, empty except for a card table piled high with bridesmaids' bouquets. "I just want you to know," she said, "how happy Corey and I are that you could make it. He speaks so warmly of you. And I also want you to know, just so there's no tension, Corey's told me everything, and I'm fully accepting of his past."

"Thank you, Ellen," I said horrified that at my age I could already be part of someone's "past." It sounded fake to me as if homosexuality was just a stage Corey had passed through, and I was some sort of perpetual adolescent, never seeing the adult light of heterosexuality.

"Angela," Ellen said. "I'm called Angela."

She opened the door, and as we were heading back out into the drawing room, she said, "Oh by the way, we've seated you next to the schizophrenic girl during the reception. Your being a social worker and all, we figured you wouldn't mind."

"Me?" I said. "Mind? Not at all."

"Thanks. Boy, is Corey going to be thrilled to see you."

Then she was gone into the crowd.

Once back in the drawing room I searched for Meridith, but I couldn't seem to find her. I was surrounded on all sides by elderly women with elaborate, peroxided hairdos. Their purses fascinated me. Some were hard as shell and shaped like kidneys. Others were made out of punctured leather that reminded me of birth control dispensers.

A little tinkling bell rang, and soon guests were beginning to move outdoors to the garden where the ceremony was taking place. Lost in the crowd, I spied Meridith and maneuvered my way next to her. "How's it going, little one?" she said.

"I feel like a piece of shit," I said. I wasn't in the mood to make small talk.

"That's what weddings are for," she said cheerfully. We headed through a pair of French doors into a small, beautiful garden, full of blooming roses and wreaths, and huge baskets of wisteria and lilies.

Handsome uniformed men—mostly brothers of the bride, I presumed—were helping everyone to their seats. Thinking we were a couple, one of them escorted Meridith and me to one of the back rows along with several other young couples who had brought their babies and might have to run out to change a diaper or something in the middle of the ceremony.

As soon as everyone was seated, the string quartet in the corner began to play something sweet and Chopin-like, and then the procession started: first Corey's sister, who was matron of honor; then the bridesmaids, each arm in arm with an usher, each dressed in a different pastel dress which coordinated perfectly with their bouquets; and then, finally, the couple themselves, looking resplendent in their costumes. I've never been to a wedding where the newlyweds walked to the altar together but nevertheless, the whole scene was breathtaking. Everyone gave out little oohs and aahs as they entered, locked tight to each other. It had been two years since we'd seen each other, and looking at Corey, I thought I'd cry. I felt like such a piece of nothing, such a worthless piece of garbage without him—he was really that beautiful. His mustache was growing back, which was the worst thing. His skin was flawless, smooth—skin I'd touched hundreds, thousands of times—and there was an astonishing brightness about his eyes as if he could see right through everything to its very heart. As they approached the altar, all bright smiles, no doubt, no regret or hesitation registering in his face, I wondered what he was thinking now: if he was thinking about his other life, his long committed days and nights as a homosexual.

The music stopped. They stood, backs to us, the audience, before the reverent reverend. He began to lecture them solemnly. And then I saw it. I saw myself stand up, run to the front of the garden, and before anyone could say anything or do anything, pull out a gun and consummate all over the grass my own splendid marriage to vengeance.

But of course I didn't do anything like that. Instead I just sat there with Meridith and listened to Corey, the love of my life, my lover, my life, repeat the marriage vows. His voice a little trembly as if to suggest he was just barely holding in his tears. They said their "I do's." They exchanged rings. They kissed, and everyone cheered.

*Elizabeth Roberts**Two Poems*

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## Morning In Costa Rica

Your orange marmalade flesh, vermillion—  
is red snapdragons, chili pepper spicy.  
Laying there, you are sensual fruit, the  
pink hue of midsummer. A single wine glass  
spilled on your bedside table. I can't come in yet  
I can only stand there. Apple and orange  
trees are growing there beside your bed.  
When you sit up, there are grape vines  
with a bounty of new grapes dropping fruit  
from your fertile hair.  
I, smooth as a slate, a plate of regret.  
I died—when you were gone.  
But now, Dionysus' muse, you are filling my room with earth.  
Dark earth, nearly black—filled  
with the seeds of giant tropical ferns.  
All this lush bounty threatens to completely  
overtake this room with its canopy of leaves.  
Plums, rolling around on the bed beneath your feet.  
One falls to the floor, and I step on it on my way  
to you, my rio, my river of wings.  
My stagnant pond grew murkier still each day  
my three songbirds silent then.  
Only to molt and grow bright yellow and new white feathers  
when I found you.  
Every morning, I took long walks through the Monteverde.  
I swam, with icy bones in the purple sea.  
Your long brown hair as long as reeds  
full with baby fish and shells  
can swim with me now.  
But, in this glowing sapphire rainforest  
we can just sit together and sleep awhile.  
Fold me in your madrigal arms, my rio.  
I can rest now that you are home.

## Klimt's Water Serpents

Gold and silver scaled serpents  
Gliding through the flowing sea  
Skimming through the liquid air—  
The amber reverberating water.  
Tails of fish and seagulls' eyes  
Hair billowing down in waves  
No further need for oxygen  
Breathing in the tepid sea.  
Taking direction  
From the North Star, Polaris  
The yellow fertile water moons  
With the grace of a snake  
Ribboning through ochre sand.  
Once caught and grounded  
and baking on dry land, the  
Seaweed bleaching in the sun—  
Their womb of water ripped away.  
They fade now to Coral Dust  
Their primordial element ripped away  
their fetal heaven.  
That is where we were all born  
where we must all return.

*Debra Pettric*

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## Hills

Wrinkled grasses tumble through the dust  
down the roads of canyons.  
Withered hills crumple against  
the valley of falling buildings  
and grey asphalt.

The woman sits quietly swaying  
her red pencilled eyebrows drawn  
carefully. Her pupils dilate darkening her sight  
as she remembers.  
Her white permed curls  
pull at her head;  
folds of white skin  
curve to follow her narrow eyes and pinched forehead  
as my voice reaches toward her.  
Colored glass prisms cup to her stretched lobes  
and fragment my words.

Nana Obermann

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## Live

His hand presses rigidly into my right shoulder. It doesn't hurt. I lift up my chin and look at him. I try to look at him, hard and steadily for the entire time. His eyes gouge mine and I think, *If only I could outstare him, If only I could outstare the fucking son of a bitch . . .* I want just once to be able to hold my stare, look into those bruise-blue irises. But I never can, and before I know it I avert my gaze and jerk my head to one side. The ceiling beyond his head is smoke blue. I watch the shadow on the walls hesitate, then shift.

This is the not-happening. *Time slides under me, away from me, slides right out of my sight.* I'm suspended in the not-happening, in timelessness, in nothing.

Sometimes at night I run around the high school track when nobody else is there. The track is porous and pumpkin-colored, feels firm under my sneakers. After a few laps, I lose myself to the warmth of the color. The miles spread swiftly and deliberately under me as if I were going in an actual direction and not in steady elliptical circles. I strain to earn distance and time with each lap. While I run in the darkness my body seems to forget its burden of weight, so I push harder until all at once my body pulls me down like a magnet to the ground, and makes me collapse onto the orange track, between those solid white lines. But soon I get up and start running again, towards home.

I want to be in love. Sweet and fresh, warm and eager to jump on command. I was in love once and like everything else precious, I lost it. Love is not what it actually implies. In love you throw your entire self off a ten story ledge trusting a safe fall. Believing in love, I dove off that ledge, not expecting his arms and heart to let me fall. He was too weak or I was too heavy. I lost that love the same way I lost my body when I was thirteen years old, reluctantly and almost innocently, on a yellow-flowered sofa one tiny summer day.

His breath is warm, labored, sticky, and on my cheek. His lips curl tightly over his yellow teeth.

"I love you," he tells me, hoarsely.

I don't exactly hear the words. The words are hollow, they stumble out in a strange world and have no meaning.

"I love you," he repeats.

Hearing the words this time, I think Love feels like armies of snakes slithering on top of you, inside of you. I recall that no matter

how much things change they remain the same. When I lay here under this man, my stepdad, I understand that no matter what age, height, or strength, I will always find myself under his armies trying hard not to think, trying hard to reach back to some other place, some logical place. Meanwhile shadows move with their own authority on the blue walls.

I used to wish I was like my brother Adam, a boy, complete with testicles, biceps, and a capacity to hate. He never, as far as I knew, set his sweating hand on my brother. Adam is my younger brother and he works out every day. He is big and stocky and growing vertically and horizontally. After a workout his body is shiny and individual veins pop out of his arms and neck the way the timer pops out of the roasting turkey when it's done. He plays football and nobody gets in his way, and if someone does, he takes them out. What I like most about him is that he leaves me alone and doesn't bother me with questions or goggle-eyed looks. We talk once in a while, but mostly we mind our own business. He keeps his life in control and I'm expected to do the same. We don't invade each other's lives, don't cross the lines. That's how it's always been.

At first I wanted to ask Adam about it, about excursions that happen outside of time, and what they mean, and if they have any meaning at all. But I always changed my mind in midsentence, realizing it would cross our lines, and continued to watch his capacity grow and thrive. Although I'm older, he seems older, just generally bigger and wiser and I'm no longer a little girl. I am twenty years old and not eating.

"You're such a god damn goody-goody," Adam used to complain. "You're as fun as a stick."

"But we'll get in trouble. I know we will," I protested. This was my way back when Adam wanted to do anything while our parents were out that wasn't completely risk-free. Now he says: "You should eat, you know. You look like hell." But he leaves it at that. He'll let me be. Only that one time, recently, when he found me crying in my room, he almost crossed a line; he asked,

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I replied flatly, not looking at him. I felt his eyes on me, so I said, "I fell asleep and was having some nightmare so Dad woke me up."

"What was the nightmare about?" Adam asked, now just curious.

"Oh monsters and stuff, you know," I faked laughter. Then I got up, smiled at him, and left the room.

I am a dutiful, proper, discreet sort of person, sort of *girl*. I eat small amounts once, maybe twice a day. Mostly I don't think about it. I think around it, describing circles. I dance bright elaborate circles around it until I become sick with fatigue and loose at individual joints. The rhythm of the dance is as rigid as a secret; either you keep it or you



don't. *Keeping secrets is easy. In second grade a friend told me a secret, told only me, because she trusted me, because she believed in my goodness.* What is more important though is that I eat or, better yet, don't eat with accuracy and that I live in the depth of a clean idea: Love, Forgiveness, Goodness. But now I'm stuck and sickened by secrets. I'm in the bottom of a stinking well.

My mother met and married my stepfather when I was thirteen. At first I didn't mind him. He took my mother, Adam, and I out to dinner and the movies every weekend and it almost felt like a real family. He was a corpulent, massive, blue-eyed, wealthy and generous man. He watched Adam's football games and elegantly dined my trim pale mother and then one tiny summer day took me to a yellow-flowered couch where he forced his eyes resolutely into mine. When I looked deep down in his pupils, there was a sudden height and suck and pull that felt like falling off a cliff. Feeling reckless once, I said to him, "Your eyes—"

"Shh . . . Have you been keeping so slim for me? My little girl . . ." His breath let spiders loose in my ear.

"Your—" I began again.

"Shh . . ." I felt tired and looked away.

I dreamt of falling from cliffs, planes, bikes, the floor. There was a constant falling and tumbling in that round and timeless space. I descended in slow terrific motion, reluctantly anticipated each inch downward. Still in midair I woke up tangled in my sweaty sheets. I screamed while falling, a bad habit. My mother found this screaming peculiar. She thought, however, it was over her head and so I was delivered into the rubber-gloved hands of professionals.

The walls here are bleached white, feigning brightness. Unit Six South is shaped like the letter L. I walk its perimeter expecting to spell something: Love, Leave, Let Go. Each is impossible. Instead I spell Longing, a familiar word. I've been here six weeks. I feel my skin peeling like onions. They want to strip me, peel me so that I cut the air (air they must breathe) with my sharpness. I know what they want and I play their game well. I answer their questions slowly, patiently. I keep them suspended on my last word.

"Why won't you eat? Why are you starving yourself?" the doctors demand. It is their profession to feign empathy. They only want an explanation. Their white coats rustle professionally. They write on pads, craning their necks to hear me better.

"Because his eyes gouge mine," I begin but do not finish. I shift and sway, with my knees pressed to my chest and my arms clasped over them, in the wooden chair, and I think, I am in a mental institution playing games like a child.

My stepfather comes to visit me every Tuesday and each Tuesday I stand in front of him with strange indifference that he immediately and miraculously recognizes. He asks the obvious,

"Well, has my skinny girl been eating?"

I don't bother to answer, continue to twirl my hair around my index finger.

When I see my psychiatrist, Dr. Janner, I start laughing. She is larger than life, ridiculously round, her bulbous nose shines in her pale moon face. When she speaks even her words seem to be soft and billowy and fluffy, radiating roundness. I laugh hard and thoroughly and soon I'm keeling over, all the while laughing. She just sits there on her chair wearing a curly smile which makes me laugh some more. Finally she asks why I am laughing.

"It's just that . . . that you're . . . you're so . . . so . . ." but I can't stop laughing.

"Now catch your breath. There now. Why are you laughing?" she asks again.

"Because you reminded me of something, someone, the way you were smiling," I lie, still slightly laughing, since it is not nice to laugh at someone for their incredible roundness and then tell them about it.

"Who did I remind you of?" she asks, strictly business, matter of fact, pushing up her sleeves. *Six weeks of the suspicious walls, the dreamless nights, the ruined scene! Six weeks of pacing and rotting. Six weeks of the drugged good-nights and the screaming from the Quiet Room! Six weeks is too much, too long.* Tired of it all, the barred moon, her fat arms, I want to push up my sleeves too. I want to sever all ties with this lonely place, forget it, pack it away with no strings attached. And I know how to start.

I tell her what happened, not about her, but about the not-happening, the yellow sofa on that miniature summer day. It comes out of me as if a hook is anchored deep down my throat and someone or something is pulling it up and out. It is being fished out of there from deep within my body and my voice is acting to help the hook come out with all the debris it has caught on to it. While I'm telling her I don't cry, but I feel the scratching of the hook in my stomach and in my throat. She takes my hand into her balloon-like one and tells me it's going to be all right. She speaks in that same soft, fuzzy, round voice and says I'm safe now with her. I imagine her, a huge ivory fortress and almost start laughing again. I know she'll tell everyone and I'll never hear the end of it. I will be further pried into with questions and implements and in the end it will still be me, but maybe without the hook.

He is approaching me from the door to my assigned room and there is the usual package of chocolate truffles in his hand. I am standing in the middle of my room, in front of the bed. I look at him from the twelve foot distance between us. He continues to walk towards me with his upper lip curled against his teeth that suggests a smile. I feel myself getting smaller and meaner and slipping off the floor. The not-happening comes like that, so abruptly, that I feel short of breath.

*If I looked outside the window I would notice the green lush vegetation of summer and would see the little dot of a sun pulsing away. I would remember seasons, sweet peaches, birthdays, hot chocolate, fairy tales, good-night kisses, and I would remember time. I would understand the terrible tension between what was and what will be and about the inevitable ruin that happens in between. If I were to look outside I would realize this but I couldn't, even for a moment, look out there. I must not for anything look beyond those eyes, remove my gaze from them, for this is what is happening:*

He approaches; I remain perfectly still.

"How is my little girl?" His face imitates concern. I wear no expression. If I extend my arm it would touch him.

"Everyone knows. *Everyone*," I hiss at him, stepping back.

"I brought you some truffles again." He smiles and hands me the package with a short step forward. The package slides out of my hands, falls to the floor.

"I told Dr. Janner! They know."

"Calm yourself, you're over-tired," he says with genuine sympathy. I notice how his hair has begun to ebb away from his forehead and how wrinkles meet each other at the corners of his face. He has a nose, lips, ears, hair, even a mouth. He is real, breathing, aging hulking flesh, and he is in front of me.

"You make me sick . . . you're disgusting . . . you . . ." The words don't seem to come out of my mouth. They sound tiny and muffled and seem caught in the fibers of the carpeted floor.

"I've been talking with Dr. Janner, too, honey. About your nightmares, those crazy nightmares—you're getting help here. I know nightmares can seem very real but you must understand, you were completely emaciated and you were, I know you don't want to hear it, very sick and probably hallucinating on top of it." He stands almost six feet with his receding hairline and his eyes. But I hold his gaze.

"You're lying, you're fuck—" I take a step towards him. Our eyes come together, calculate.

"Don't curse at me! Don't you even try!" His voice is hollow but loud. *Outside a tremendous sun pulses away no matter what;* I tell myself, *Live, for once just stare that bastard down.* He begins to raise his hand, but then moves back.

"Don't you ever curse at me," he whispers.

"They weren't nightmares," I say.

"They were crazy nightmares," he tells me firmly.

"They weren't nightmares," I repeat.

"Honey, when you're better you'll realize they were. You just need more time here." He smiles at me calmly. I look into his face, my eyes burning on him like spotlights.

"Yes," I say, "it really happened." He shifts his weight.

"You'll be all right," he assures me and shifts his weight to the opposite foot. I don't move. He watches me; I don't look away. And suddenly it's as if I am holding him there, in his neat pressed suit and graying hair, and I could let go in my own time, at my own pace. We look at each other for what seems like a long time. Finally, he looks down at the package of chocolate on the floor, then looks back at me. Through the window a dense grainy light sifts in and I watch him leave the room. At the door he turns around, his eyes look dry and flat, and abruptly says, "See you soon." He turns the knob, disappears behind the door.

He doesn't come back soon. He doesn't come back at all. His absence is loud and beautiful like a peacock's spread tail, each feather a bright mooned ribbon. The peacock struts in my hospital room, down the hospital hallway. Opening his tail for me he tells me, *it has happened*. It has happened, I tell Dr. Janner and she, in all her roundness, bobs her head and agrees. We both believe in my peacock, this strength, those full moon ribbons spreading out like a brilliant doorway.

Today I leave the L shaped unit Six South. I pack my few belongings and pass a brush through thick hair. On the paper in the office which is usually off limits there is an X. It is mysterious at first like a buried pirate treasure. It seems to take a long time before I finally sign my name in script on the black line provided. I think, *Time is like a black line, visible, sequential and definable*. And it is time to move forward on that solid black line.

## Contributors' Biographical Notes

**TRACY ABELN** is a senior at the University of Missouri–Columbia; her anticipated graduation date is May 1996. She has no immediate plans after graduation but has a long term goal of teaching English overseas. In her spare time she volunteers at a local Head Start program and enjoys painting.

**KIERSTEN ALLEN** graduated from Kansas State University in December of 1995 with a B.A. in English. Kiersten's work will be published in *The Poetic Voices of America*, a journal based in Sistersville, West Virginia, in June of 1996. Her work will also be featured in an upcoming anthology of poetry edited by Jonathan Holden, tentatively titled *The Sunflower Anthology*. She and her husband Ken are expecting a baby girl.

**LORI BEIKMAN** is a senior at Kansas State in Graphic Design. She would someday like to enter the field of magazine illustration; her ideal workplace is *Rolling Stone*. Lori is the winner of the KSU *Touchstone* Cover Art Competition for the 1995–96 issue. She is originally from Linn, Kansas.

**JENNIFER BERGEN** graduated from Kansas State University in May 1995 with a B.A. in English. She is currently working on her master's degree and teaching expository writing at KSU. Her hometown is Goessel, Kansas, where her parents and grandparents grew up. The poem that appears in this issue is the winner of the 1995–6 KSU *Touchstone* Poetry Award.

**BEN CARTWRIGHT** is a freshman at KSU majoring in English with a tentative double major in French or business. After graduating, he plans to either teach or return to Washington to the coffee shop where he has worked making espresso and baking for the past four years. He recently won second place in the Manhattan Poetry Contest and has previously been published in the *Tenth Anniversary Anthology* of the Spokane Open Poetry Association.

**JENNIFER FARRIS** is a junior in Graphic Design at Kansas State. Jennifer says her art attempts to explore many themes: " 'Fountain Stories' is about the value of passing along folklore, especially for women," and "The Last Touch" deals with the impermanence of human relationships, how "when you touch someone, you cannot know if it will be for the last time." "Laramie Corner" has a much simpler goal—Jennifer says it's "really just a still life of a room in my house." Jennifer is originally from Wichita, Kansas.

**CRISTINA JANNEY** graduated from K-State in December 1995 with a degree in journalism. She is currently working for the *Junction City Daily* (Junction City, Kansas) as a reporter. Her writing has been influenced by Tobias Wolff and Joyce Carol Oates.

**JENNIFER L. JOHNSON** is a junior at KSU. She is double-majoring in English and anthropology and will graduate in December of 1997. She plans to pursue a master's degree in anthropology and eventually teach and do field work. She was encouraged to write by her teachers in her hometown of Winfield, Kansas. One of her hobbies is running, which she calls her "thinking time."

**SHARON MORELAND** is a fifth-year senior at Kansas State majoring in English. Sharon plans to pursue a master's degree in library science at Indiana University at Bloomington after her graduation. Manhattan is her hometown, and she was born and raised in the house her poem describes. This is her first publication.

**NANA OBERMANN** will graduate from Binghamton University in May 1996. She grew up in Port Washington, New York. She hopes to eventually pursue a Ph.D. in literature, with a concentration in creative writing. She reads and is influenced by Raymond Carver, Jeanette Winterson, and Leonard Michaels.

**KEVIN OWENS** graduated from KSU in December 1995 with a degree in physical science. He is now working as the director of sales and marketing for a software company. In "Marriage to Vengeance" he was "playing around with and poking fun at stereotypes" and "trying to show that people can love each other regardless of who they are."

**DEBRA PETTRIC**, from Los Angeles, California, is a sophomore at the University of California at Davis. She is majoring in English and plans to graduate in June of 1998. Debra became interested in writing after taking a poetry class in junior high school. Her hobbies are reading, writing, exercise (especially water sports), and spending time in the outdoors.

**KIMBERLY RILEY** is a junior in English at K-State. Graduate school and, eventually, teaching at the college levels are "possibilities" for Kimberly. Her hometown is Dover, Kansas. This is her first publication.

**ELIZABETH ROBERTS** is a sophomore at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas and is double-majoring in English and journalism. Two of Elizabeth's poems and one of her short stories were recently published in *Inscape*, Washburn's undergraduate literary journal. Her work will also appear in *The Sunflower Anthology*.

**KEELY SCHIELDS** will graduate from KSU in May, 1997. The story appearing here won *Touchstone's* annual fiction contest in the spring of 1995. Keely says her "overall goal when writing fiction is to provoke thought—to make readers stop and think why things are the way they are, or what things could become."

**JONATHAN A. SMALL** is a senior at KSU. Double-majoring in English and history, he plans to graduate in May of 1997. Jonathan's other publications include the 1995 issue of *Touchstone*, and the forthcoming *Sunflower Anthology*. His hobbies are fly fishing and travelling.

**KRIS STEWARD** is a junior at Rowan College in New Jersey. She transferred there after spending nearly three years at KSU. She is working toward her bachelor's degree in communications, studying radio, TV, and film; her minor is political science. Kris has written for the *Kansas State Collegian* and the Kansas Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. One of her plays, *Like Peaches*, will be produced at Rowan as part of a collaborative play called *Correspondences*.



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