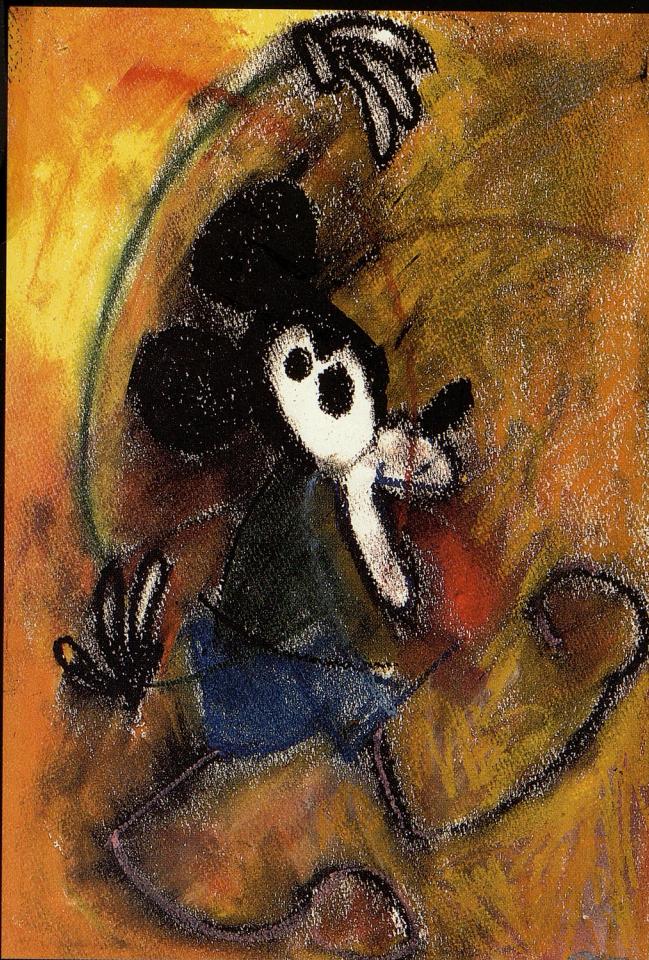


# Touch•stone

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Kansas State University

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*Thomas Gribble*

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## An Orange Under Pressure in the Desert

It was the summer I took an orange into the desert  
for its diversity  
among yuccas and diamondbacks.  
Having tasted another part of the world  
far from where Jerusalem crickets were tiny motors  
pulling on the stillness,  
pulling the stars closer.  
I believed fangs could enter citrus  
and change life forever.

You can't imagine this conflict between the orange  
and the desert snake  
unless you had been caught screwing:  
twenty years old, naked in the burning grave  
of Yucca Lake.  
There was an orange in your hand,  
and the snake  
had shaken off the chill of his night  
to become a policeman giving orders to your bare ass.

Atoms lay everywhere.  
Something more:  
your unlucky lover took that moment to scream  
into that rock and space.  
Some things in the desert were best eaten raw,  
like the slow wind,  
the mussel moon,  
and the grudge of a snake.  
In that biotic metronome, in the shade  
of a Dodge police truck,  
ants taste like lemons.

*Iris Gribble-Neal*

---

## Eco-System

My cousin Sylvia is an eco-woman. She works  
as a bartender at the Coyote Café, forecasts  
which side of the moon shines on full-rain  
mornings when her clientele shakes in early.  
They are the endangered  
species, wet cigarettes glued to their lips,  
strands of tobacco on their tongues.  
They spit like camels, those last links  
between dinosaurs and hell.  
The girls are tired from four inches of strut,  
big cats who stretch and yawn and count  
twenty dollar bills until the pimp with a velvet  
hat and black mane growls in to take  
their kill. One tall giraffe of a woman with no  
teeth doesn't drink but chews on coffee.  
Her gums slide across each other like a tectonic  
fault. Silverback gorillas come later.  
Morning is no time to beat  
your chest. The federal government is rounding  
them up for return to Yellowstone.  
They will be re-introduced to the wild,  
learn to eat hikers wearing Timberlane boots.

*Iris Gribble-Neal*

---

Mining the Rainbow at the Sunshine, 1898

Nothing dreams of Spokane except the falls  
who also miss the tribes and fish

like silver escaping the Sunshine Mine,  
slippery souls of men blasting.

They swim to the beat of  
dynamite like a heart

and the drum of skins stretching taut  
across the river, hanging

a bridge. Your feet hear the water  
cry in great rushes, kicking

stone. The willows bend,  
deaf women with silk hair mourning

graves at Smelterville, scales of the glittering  
fish, dancing doeskin.

*Jared Janovec*

---

Pope Urban VIII and Galileo in a Decomposing Paradise



Medium: Lithograph

*Kris Christensen*

---

Evolution

Water in the oily pan spat at the dark  
where I held the holographic fish  
over flour. I turned it in the one  
light, scales reflecting a boy caught  
between two inventions  
of manhood. In the first, the boy grew  
strong. His muscles flexed the fish's back  
at the air's touch. His second man  
dreamed himself a coiled filament  
of light mating in warmer waters.  
I told them I believed  
this fish was a sunlit accident,  
and Edison's electric thoughts  
burned in murky depths.  
A woman appeared  
twisting her long hair into fins  
that might become feathers,  
could lead to flight.

*Brad Garmon*

---

## Walking in Big Places

Eight or nine years old, I followed my father's gaze across the face of a wide ocean of rolling sand and weeds and dried corn stalks northeast of my hometown in southwest Kansas, where the horizon is so flat and so far away the world's only limits were our poor eyesights and the subtle, visible curvature of the earth itself. Vastness made tangible; standing small beside him and an old, red Jeep Wagoneer, aged to a dusty orange, in a world split exactly in half by blue-sky dome and windblown fields. Oceans made of grasses and fields and, on crisp fall mornings, an expanse of brilliant blue sky so big it makes people start asking questions of themselves. Big questions, for a big land.

Places like these, I have come to realize in the years since, are an acquired taste. Anything as big and as empty as southwest Kansas has a way of making most people uncomfortable. They don't like those big questions, don't like being able stand in the middle of nothing and see to the edge of the world, to feel their own smallness so acutely.

But my father was different; he and my mother have a love for that land that has kept them living out there in that ocean all of my life, and much of theirs. They talk of his retiring and then moving south to New Mexico, to the volcanic mountains they visit around Raton, but I don't think they will ever leave for good. He seems to have come to an understanding with the vastness of southwest Kansas, and walks through it, along with everything else life throws at him, with a quiet casualness that I admire. My father doesn't seem to ask those big questions, at least not that he has ever told me. But then again, he doesn't really talk too much, so there's no way of knowing what kinds of questions he might have been asking himself, standing beside an old Jeep in a field beside his youngest son.

We had come to that particular field, full of sand and old dry cornstalks, to look for arrowheads. He'd found them in the windblown fields since he was a boy, growing up on his dad's homestead farm about thirty miles south and five miles west of Ulysses, close to the Oklahoma border. Searching for arrowheads consisted of walking, striking out from the known and walking across those vast windswept hills, eyes focused on the windswept ground, and for me, I discovered, it consisted of walking like my father, of finding a comfortable casualness amidst all the big questions big places ask of a person.

I remember this scene in faint images and vague feelings, distantly. It reminds me that my father and I, if even for the briefest of moments, shared a unique view of the world that day. We walked to-

gether in that sea, that empty ocean, amidst the rolling waves of wind-blown sand that stretched away to lose themselves against the sky, and we saw things as if through the same eyes. The earth below us—its very sediments and sandy grains and dry, crunchy blades of sun-scorched prairie grass and wispy old cornstalks—demanded complete attention, filled the mind completely, and together we were blind to all the vast world around us. No sky, no horizon, we studied the earth in front of us carefully, looking for arrowheads.

I see my father walking in front of me, stepping away from the Jeep and into that field with a long, swinging swagger that seems to breathe with the confidence of a man comfortable in these big spaces. His hips roll, his shoulders swinging, shifting weight back and forth smoothly with each step as he walks away, and his footsteps appear in the sand beneath me and I set out to follow him.

I stepped slowly, hesitantly, watching him as he walked off the edge of the road and into the waves of the sand hills. I looked down at his footprint where his leather boot sunk inches into the sand in front of me, and I paused on the solid edge of the field. He continued to walk away, and I looked closely at this first footprint, held mesmerized as the sand tumbled down from the edges of the hole he left behind, sliding into it like liquid pouring in over the rim of a bucket being pushed underwater. It filled, the sand found its angle of repose and stopped.

Taking a breath, I walked further out into the rolling fields after him, my head down to study the ground, suddenly intrigued by the contours and the ridges and the sediments beneath me. I knew without looking up that he, too, had his head down, watching the sand as it passed underfoot. He watched the ground because it is where he found himself at that moment; it was what he wanted to do, he understood it, and for my father, that was always enough. The vastness of his surroundings, the big nothingness waiting for him to lift his head from the task at hand, did not really seem to be a consideration.

Maybe that's why I have never heard my father worrying over big questions, big emptiness—he doesn't feel the weight of vastness surrounding him because he sees what is right there, close in front of him, like the ground that lived and moved and slid beneath our feet.

I understand this more now than ever, after a visit from him, just a few weeks ago, after a particularly difficult time for me at graduate school, when he heard my confusion, saw my doubts, and said, "It's hard to find yourself when you were never really lost." Simple answers my father learned, I assume, while walking casually, comfortably, through big empty places.

We wandered those windblown fields for hours. We didn't walk together; we struck off on our own, together but apart, which is pretty

common for us. Though alone, we somehow shared the hills and the time; I walked and thought of the little orange and blue plastic tool chests he had at home, with little clear plastic drawers overflowing with the little pieces of history he has found over a lifetime. All shapes and sizes, from large spearpoints six or seven inches long, to the tiniest, most delicate point. For killing birds, he somehow let me know. I never remember him coming out and telling me anything like that. The information, like most of his hard-earned wisdom, seemed to find its way from his mind into mine without any words I can pin down in my memory. He knew what most of the ancient tools were called: Folsom points, hatchet heads, grinding stones for corn meal. He had books about them, books with pictures that looked just like the chipped point he held up beside them. The books held a place of respect in our house, lined up on the shelf alongside the Louis L'Amour westerns my two older brothers and I grew up reading, just like Dad.

The hills were blown bare by the winds of the days before. Fields of dryland corn and wheat, then harvested or burned, had changed to fields of rough, raspy corn stalks and sparse, dried grasses, and been blown into smooth rolling seas of brown sand. Fine quartz. From the ancient Rockies to the west. The earth traveled eastward down their long slopes, moved by wind and river as the range was chipped and beaten and weathered away and new mountains rose up to take the place of the old ones in a smooth, unnoticed cycle.

Close to the road the grasses and corn stalks still clung to the sandy soil and kept it in place, but further out into the fields the winds had free reign. I'd stepped off a shore and into shifting, moving currents of sand. I picked through the sediments with my eyes as I walked, my head down, studying the places where I could still see hints of old crop rows—a tuft of grass or a dead corn stalk anchored in the sand, holding on in the face of the long hot winds that roar across that empty flat land. These stoic remnants of what came before slowed the wind down just enough that the blowing sand accumulated on the downwind side and stretched away from the bits of vegetation in long, low ridges. Between these, the sand was smooth and its blowing and moving uncovered tiny treasures for my father, and maybe that day, I hoped, for me.

It was a Saturday morning in the fall, a calm day after the wind had shifted entire hillsides around for a week. They are always there, just buried. And the wind changes everything. I walked through a world of sand, the taste of excitement and hope metallic in my mouth. I was hoping to find my own motherlode, and maybe he was, too—I never really know, even today, what he hopes for, or if he has any of these big dreams, outside of the life he has found: his stable job, trapshooting, arrowhead hunting, a loving wife and four children, an old Jeep Wagoneer. I'll never be sure if this life is what he wanted, if it is just

the life he found, or if maybe it is both—he wants it because it is what he has found.

I looked up from the ground. Big emptiness extended away in all directions—sand, cornstalks, and a tangible nothingness stretching to the horizon, with me somewhere in the middle. My stomach dropped and the big thoughts pushed down on me like atmosphere, invisible and heavy. I felt small, the arrowheads I looked for even smaller. Impossibly small amidst such space. My father ambled casually in the distance, studying the ground at his feet.

Years later, when I am sixteen and I nearly lose my license for reckless driving, my father will let me know somehow, *I am proud of you*. He will not get angry; for going to the man whose land I virtually destroyed with our Jeep and apologizing face to face, my father will let me know, *You were brave*. He is a man seemingly free of expectations, and free of the disappointment that comes when expectations aren't met.

Perhaps this freedom is the source of the strength that I admire, the reason why he could be so patient and walk so smoothly, casually, through those long, empty fields where maybe, just maybe, one tiny arrowhead lay waiting in an endless, wide ocean of sand. This is how that smooth, rolling, assured walk of his could leave footprints through such wide expanses, where the wind and shifting sands whispered futility across distant ridges. Maybe he just doesn't look up, doesn't worry about or contemplate that he is searching for something so small, so delicate, amid so much space.

The arrowheads, even then, were getting harder to find as the soil conservation projects put much of the land into seasonal rotations, out of production for years, so it didn't get planted, plowed under, or burned each year. The CRP lands were different, covered in low scrub weeds, pastures taking hold and keeping more of the delicate sandy soil in place. Times are changing. The vast windblown hills were stripped bare less frequently; these smooth, windblown fields fewer and further between. This was another development my father seemed to take in stride, seemingly understanding and accepting that the world would change; he just kept walking, and he still found arrowheads on a regular basis.

I paused more frequently to look around. My youthful attention span was frustratingly short, and I was aware of it. I wanted to be patient, to find boxfuls as Dad had done, but I was not patient. Instead, I watched my father walking in the distance. I started to kick at the sand as I walked, and stopped as I realized how childish it was.

I crouched down in the sand, trying to imitate the stance I had seen in an old black and white picture of my father's father. I tried to balance comfortably, with my feet flat, butt low, almost touching the ground. I had heard my father talk about this particular squat at Thanksgiving dinners or Christmas holidays when the family was all together.

It was something, he told us, that his father did. He had seen it in western movies, too, like when Sam Elliot played one of the Sackett brothers in the television adaptations of Louis L'Amour's books.

I tried to imitate the family squat there in the middle of the field, but couldn't do it, periodically falling forward or falling back. Giving up, I began to study the way my father walked instead, trying to see the particular way his weight shifted and his hips rolled smoothly in that long, confident stride—another family heritage—and wondered if I'd ever have it.

Our family supposedly has a particular way of walking, and I think maybe it is that easy, assured walk of a generation or two who have stretched their legs in big places like this; confidence made manifest in a casual rolling stride. People say they can recognize it a long way off, an easily identifiable, swinging swagger. It is somehow uniquely our heritage, and it is something I can already sense is pleasing for my father as he watches his three sons growing up. None of us boys ever knew his dad, our grandpa, but we've seen the few pictures of him. I think it makes him proud to see himself, and his father, in us.

My two brothers and I are the only men left in my dad's father's family, and I feel a gentle whisper of responsibility in this knowledge. Most times, it is an easy burden, a weight eased perceptibly, for example, when the three of us brothers sit together, three-abreast, across the bench seat of my small Ford pickup; we have shoulders that don't quite fit, three broad sets that share a load and must be turned, overlapped a little, to close the doors.

It happened again—this subtle shoulder reassurance—just last summer, at my oldest brother Lance's wedding. He weaved his way through the airport in Columbus, Ohio, to pick up my other brother, Leslie—named after the grandfather we never knew—and me, driving a small Chevy pickup that he and his fiancée had just bought. The three of us clambered in, automatically and without hesitation turning our shoulders a little to make room for each other. I don't know if my two brothers thought about it the same way; I suppose other things, more pressing things, filled their minds; Lance was, after all, getting married the next day. I think perhaps being the youngest by a few years allows me a certain reflective distance at times like that.

Later, after the rehearsal dinner had ended, Lance, two of his friends, my brother Leslie, our father, and I walked to "The Buckeye," a mass of lights, pool tables, and big glass cases of Ohio State Buckeye collectors' memorabilia housed in a sports bar across the parking lot from the hotel where we were staying. We pulled up chairs, one unique group among many crowded around large wood tables, and I looked past them to the big, dark wood bars and tables, rows of pool tables, toward a video gameroom in the back.

It was the first time I ever drank beer with my father; I was 23. Both of my brothers ordered. Pale Ale. Killian's Irish Red. I ordered a big Coors Light, and on the other side of the big oak rectangle, I heard my father's low voice, always especially gruff in social situations, order the same. We tried to talk; we were soon playing pool. Dad won most of the time; it was exactly the kind of bachelor party I would have expected from our family.

We left the bar relatively early, at least by the standards I had established after four years of college back in Kansas. Five of us waited, ghostly under the pale, phosphorescent glow of the neon lights in front of the bar, while Dad walked to the convenience store at the end of the block for his package of cigarettes. I watched him go, the casual swinging of his hips and shoulders slowly fading unobtrusively into the darkness across the parking lot, and then turned back to the group. A light Ohio breeze moved through us, heavy with asphalt and exhaust; the April night was growing chilly. I listened as they talked, and watched the slow parade of emotions and thoughts across Lance's face, where I could read bits and pieces of stories, a life I hadn't really been a part of since I was a child, and tales of the preparations and last minute concerns of these last few days and weeks. I was surprised by my brother, surprised by his life when I saw it up close, at how many people and things he had to think about, how big his life had grown out here in Ohio, while I wasn't looking. I stopped listening, letting my own mind slowly wrap itself around the weight of the truth; Lance had already expanded his world out of our family's known boundaries; the wedding tomorrow was just a formality.

Columbus was bigger than any city I'd ever lived in, and the biggest place Lance had lived in, too. The largest campus in the United States, he had told me. I watched over their shoulders, absentmindedly, as a stiff, awkward man—homeless, no doubt, or drunk—weaved slowly through the muted, darkened expanse of parking lot behind our group, his legs and arms jerking and moving with difficulty; awkward movements, a marionette in the inexperienced hands of a child. I forced myself to look away, past him, toward the four lanes of tail-lights and streetlights flashing on the windows of cars on the street beyond, and eventually back to a conversation that went on without me.

"I can't believe I forgot to call Steve," my brother was saying. Steve was his fiancée's brother, who had left after the reception to take their parents back to their house across the city. But Lance didn't dwell on his mistake, didn't linger in regret; I could sense he'd already moved on to other concerns, unwilling or unable, at this point of the weekend, to spend undue time considering problems he couldn't solve. At that moment, he reminded me of our father, and I smiled as I listened to he and his friends discussing the weekend in late-night,

disconnected calmness, laughing quietly, shoulders shrugged against the cool night air.

"Wonder what's taking Dad so long?" I asked casually, hoping to see if Lance was thinking about him, too. Before he could answer, the world slowed; I felt an image suddenly catching in my mind, turning me away from my brother's face, spinning me back around, back toward a place across the parking lot that my mind felt more than saw. My father was still there, the marionette-man hobbling across the parking lot in frightened old-man steps, quiet, trying to be casual while jerking a leg forward, each in cautious turn, and placing it trembling, painful, before attempting the other. Arms awkward; counterweight balances desperately trying to offset each small forward step.

He was stopped just past the middle of the expanse of black asphalt; I could see his legs shaking, stark in a telescopic view that seemed to close the distance between us. He was waiting for the shaking to stop before walking further. I stepped far enough out of the group to call out, quietly, asking if he was okay. Yes, be there in a second. He started walking again; carefully, painfully, slowly. I asked if his boots were hurting his feet. He didn't answer, and when he reached us, he quietly apologized.

"Sorry," I think he said. "Damn blood pressure medicine. Won't let my heart rate go up, makes my legs shaky. Hard to walk." He paused, awkward grin cutting a pale face. "I don't think they've got it quite right, just yet, do you?"

We waited as a group. No one seemed surprised, no one questioned him further while he rested. It was nothing unusual for him, I guess. He was taking this stage of his life in stride, and the rest of us could do nothing less. Reassured by his explanation, trusting his calmness, the group started across the parking lot. Dad's walk was slow and pained, and if I'm not mistaken, frightened. We tried not to notice his legs trembling; he pushed himself so he wouldn't slow us down, we slowed down so we wouldn't push him. He was careful and as always, patient and calm in his journey, hips set squarely, unswervingly, moving unquestioning in the direction of his destination; arms, with carefully calculated, arrhythmic jerks; legs, placed individually, with forethought and intense concentration--a child walking on ice and afraid of another painful fall.

After many long, unsure minutes, Dad's patient and careful walk, so casual in its pain, and so painstaking in its deliberateness, carried each of us unknowingly through the long, empty parking lot to our motel on the other side; Lance's friends, Tom and Peter said good night. The next day my brother Lance got married, and my father's confident steps returned; booted feet sliding smooth, knees bent and hips swaying in an unconsciously graceful rhythm. With oblivious abandon, shuffling, a parents' old-fashioned dance, boldly unconcerned

with everyone else, he moved my mother across the floor at the reception, careless and heedless of the world as they moved in a dance I had only seen them do a few times when they pushed back the green rug, worn thin from years of traffic, from the living room of the house where I grew up.

I didn't find an arrowhead that day in the sand hills with my father. In fact, I haven't ever found one. My father still has all the ones he has picked up over the years, though most of the best are now displayed on the living room walls in frames he made out in his woodshop. Each intricate dove-tail joint and perfectly smooth, sanded, stained, and polished surface of the frames are testaments to his patience, the products of endless hours of devoted, loving labor. The arrowheads he has found fill up nine of these frames, and he still has the little plastic toolboxes full downstairs in the basement. Nowadays his medicine is better and his blood pressure bulb has become the most popular entertainment at holidays, when the family is all together. My brothers and I have a running contest to see who is in the best shape, who has the lowest heart rate and the healthiest blood pressure.

And today, the September air is cool and heavy as I leave school, weighted with the anticipation of a storm that probably won't come for days; night has fallen and the wind gently rustles the leaves of the trees. It feels as if the world is holding its breath, wanting to whisper something to me. I listen for a moment, look down at my feet. I start to walk away, and decide not to walk on the sidewalk. I step off into the grass and turn to watch my footprints behind me as the blades spring back and the defined edges of each footprint fade into each other. I am a child, and my father's footsteps appear beneath me and I, like each of my brothers, follow him.

*Kris Christensen*

---

Panorama with Elvis and Some Ripe Bananas

My friend Linda saw Him in Walla Walla  
in a Safeway produce section  
squeezing the too-ripe bananas and crooning  
to the palest tomatoes. I believe  
He will always be there  
torn between cantaloupes and strawberries.  
Es muy loco, Sí? Green beans snap  
to attention when His cart draws near.  
Somewhere, far away in Kansas, a cloud rolls  
into the gray trumpet of a flower,  
as the King begins *Love Me Tender*. I don't sing  
along. I want the smell of sun-struck  
gravel, memory of alum seizing my tongue.  
Only when I am quiet  
can I hear shovel find stone  
in my garden, and know that some days  
even flies become our friends,  
taking us out of here as they lay  
their futures in our sleeping bodies.  
If I forget this fact, I will forget  
my own name. The trees will bend  
in half without breaking. Dark will join  
with Los Angeles haze, and an afternoon wail  
of car alarms will announce His return.  
It was a happy death, I think,  
a warm cloak falling away into cool whiteness.

*Thomas Gribble*

---

*Holding Up Darby*

After ten years, a visit with my father  
was a slow dance  
of cold hands and second thoughts.  
He still liked his place in the dark: clean  
and ordered,  
no light to empty its corners.

Two of the bones  
that held him up as Darby  
were broken.  
A tussock of gray  
questioned his forehead,  
and his words, still a voice  
of distance,  
were barely audible in a child's backyard  
where rain tasted like mint.

I needed to fit into this stranger's heart,  
but the most I could hope for  
was that death would come for him  
in his favorite dream.  
I held his hand of bone  
and time.  
The moon burned its autumn fetish,  
cleansed of doubt  
and willing to suffer  
for a taste of the sweet chill.

## Marty Nash

### My Heroes Have Always Been Carpenters

---

Sunday mornings had no need for alarms in my father's house.  
*You're listening to Waxworks on KSAL.*

The scratchy sounds of trumpets, clarinets, violins, and cymbals would echo back and forth between my bedroom walls, shaking me out of my slumber hours before I'd have liked them to. The muffled sounds matched my tired, muffled thoughts as I'd spin around in bed trying to go back to sleep. I didn't crawl out of bed onto the cold basement cement floor; no matter how much I wanted to run upstairs and yell "Turn it down!" I couldn't. Sunday mornings were sacred to my father in his own way. These times were spent in worship of the simple pleasures of a beat-up orange recliner, piles of fried pork side meat, Louis L'Amour books, and big band classics from Glenn Miller and Count Basie.

I'd lie in bed, huddled in masses of patchwork quilts that Dad had picked up at auctions. A small gas furnace flame would flicker orange and blue, doing its best to fight off the chills from the cold, damp walls that had been ruined by flooding. I remember lying in bed, thinking about what my friends and their families were doing. They'd be getting dressed in their stiff white shirts and paisley ties and flowered dresses. Conversation about grandparents and pastors would float around like the aroma of the pancakes that were cooking in the kitchen. After breakfast, everyone would load into their new Buicks and Pontiacs and drive to church, where other stiff white shirts and flowered dresses would shake their hands and say things like "How are you?" and "It's nice to see you this morning." My dad's twelve-year-old Chrysler sat in the driveway, while Dad sat in his broken-down orange pew, singing "Ramblin' Rose" along with Nat King Cole.

Once in a while, I'd go to church with a friend and his family. My friends would get dressed in their sixty-dollar dress shoes and slacks with matching socks while I'd slip on a pair of white socks and Wal-Mart "leather" shoes. As I'd walk through the house, my ugly shoes sinking into the plush carpet, I'd marvel at the matching furniture, the entertainment centers, the perfect family portraits, the central air conditioning controls.

At church, I'd sit with the rest of the children in the back, drawing or making paper airplanes out of the pamphlets and schedules. From where I sat, I could see the town doctors and lawyers, their slicked-back hair as shiny as gold. They scared me, with their fancy clothes and formal speech. I wondered if someday I'd be able to talk like

them, to say "rambling" instead of "ramblin'," to be as comfortable around these "intellectuals" as I was around my father's fishing buddies.

For me, comfort was sitting in a fifteen foot metal fishing boat on the Solomon River at midnight, listening to symphonies of crickets and swaying branches. The summer breeze carried Dad's stories around to each of us, wrapping around us, pulling us together. He'd tell stories about old drinking buddies and the pranks they'd pull and the fights they'd get into . . . stories about guys with names like Pete and Kenny and Muff. One of Dad's best friends, a guy named "Clutchie," was the center of many of the stories.

"I remember one time we hooked up an air horn to the brakes in ol' Clutchie's van so when he hit the pedal that sucker'd go off. You shoulda heard him cuss us after he drove it." Then he broke into a hairlip accent to imitate Clutchie driving down the road when the horn went off.

"Said he just about hit a semi it scared him so bad."

We didn't catch many fish those nights. We didn't care, though. The experience mattered to us, not the results. The stars in the summer sky seemed close enough to touch. The occasional lapping of the muddy water against the side of the boat, the strong smell of fish on our hands, the clean taste of the breeze blowing in from the giant oaks and cottonwoods on the banks--these things were real. I didn't want to leave these things, though I had a feeling someday I would need to. I was to be one that used his head, and not his hands, to make a living. "You're going to have to take care of your poor ol' mammie some day," my mother would say, half-jokingly.

On the Solomon River, I didn't need stiff white shirts, family portraits. . . formalities. I could look up at the moon and the stars in my ten dollar Rustler jeans and hand-me-down coat and say "ain't" or "sure 'nuff," and they wouldn't change. The moon and the stars, the trees, the muddy banks, the fallen branches that textured the river's surface--they didn't care. There in that boat with my father, I didn't need a tie to feel important. I didn't need a preacher to tell me how to act, or the difference between right and wrong, or the keys to leading a good life.

I guess I'm still bull-headed in this aspect. Even though I've spent four years as a cog in the hard, cold machine that "educates" us, I'm afraid of this world where you're judged by how intelligently you speak, or by what material gains you're able to make. I'm afraid I'll never be able to find a balance between the world where I'm supposed to recognize good from bad with my head and not my heart, and the blue-collar world that I come from, where the heart drives the hands. Where what is accomplished comes from the need and not want.

Sometimes I'm tempted to tuck my tail between my legs and limp home. "I can't be one of them," I'd say. I can't do this though--I know

I'd go crazy. Even though this is the world I come from, it's not all that I am anymore.

I used to think my father lived only in this blue-collar world. Monday through Friday, from six in the morning to three in the afternoon, he can be found at the local hospital, fixing generators, oiling wheelchairs, or stopping by an old-timer's room to talk about tractors or football. A recliner invites him to an hour-long nap after work, and then he's off to what he refers to as his "treasures." These treasures can range from broken-down lawn-mowers to three-legged tables to old car carcasses. You can never have too much of anything--this is his golden rule. "You never know when something's gonna break and you're gonna need another," he says. His wife, who used to drop hints about the backyard mess, now blatantly professes that it is in great need of a clean-up.

The garage, two sheds, and the backyard are full of these treasures, each its own ghost of a former life. He walks around "the junkyard," as my nephews call it, his strong, callused hands picking things up to admire. His soft eyes, surrounded by dark, leathery skin from forty years of manual labor, scan the treasure, his mind wondering when he'll have time to give it new life. For now, though, he must work. House payments, new heads for the truck, seats for the boat, a child in college--these things cost more than his paycheck covers. There's money to be made patching Mrs. Chaput's roof or building a new fence for Mrs. Peterson across the street.

Sometimes when I visit on the weekends, we'll walk around the backyard, and he'll show off his latest auction purchases or tell me about a boat he's spotted for sale.

"What about the other boats?" I ask him, referring to the three that have been sitting unusable for three years.

"I might have somebody lined up to buy 'em," he says, and then he asks me, "What do you think?"

He always asks for my opinion.

"Well, if you think you can swing it, go for it," I answer, knowing that money is usually the deciding factor.

I remember the first time I began to worry about money. I was in fifth grade. My mother and father had just divorced, and Dad was living in a small apartment about five blocks from our house. I remember them talking one Friday afternoon in that small apartment when Mom had taken me there for my weekend visit. "Squire's shuttin' down," he said as I watched G.I. Joe on TV. Dad had been a finish carpenter and foreman at Squire Construction for too many years for me to remember.

"What will you do?" Mom asked.

"Well, for now, I'm gonna try some jobs on my own. I think I know enough people I can keep busy."

Later that year, Dad sat me down. It's the first "man-to-man" talk I can remember. He said he had to start something called a budget, and we had to decide how we were going to spend our weekends. We could go to a movie each weekend, or we could get a VCR on a rent-to-own program through a store downtown. I picked the VCR. It was something we could keep, something that would have value later.

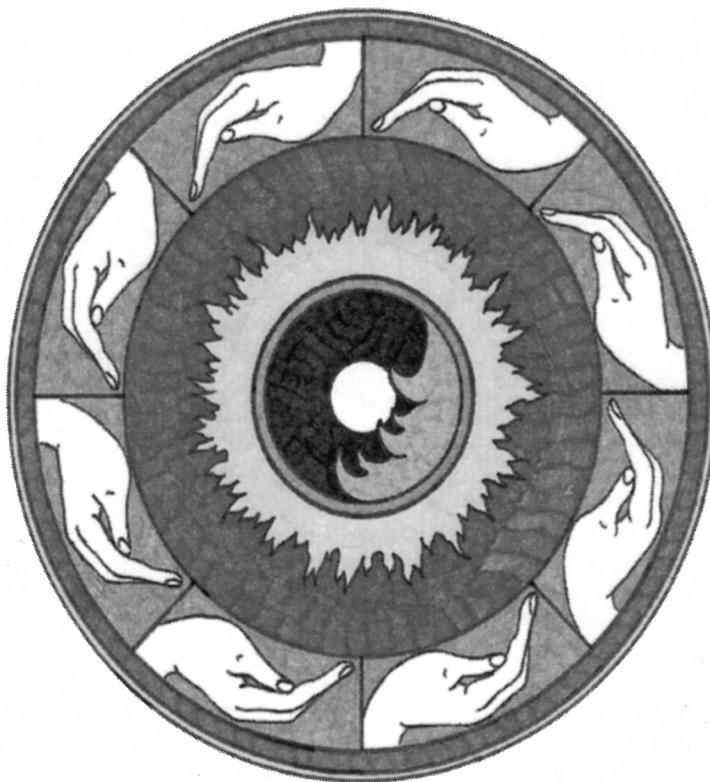
For Christmas that year, I received one present from my father--a seven-dollar Transformer figurine, one that you could combine with others to form one giant robot. He apologized to me as I sat by the tree, surrounded by numerous other robots and motorized Bigfoot trucks. I had a new favorite Transformer, though . . . one that would win all the battles in the future. While my friends had their giant, shiny robots that changed into semi-trucks or even cities, I had one that had meaning behind it--something real.

My father still attends his reclining church every Sunday morning, reading from the good books of Louis L'Amour and Zane Grey. Old records from countless auctions have replaced the "Waxworks" program. I talk to him sometimes about the books I'm reading in college, about stories by intellectuals such as Melville and Hemingway, and poems by Whitman and Frost. I'm no longer surprised when he says he's read them. Sometimes, he'll pull out a dusty copy of Poe's *Short Stories* and recommend something while Hank Williams plays on the record player. And each time, it gets easier and easier to find that balance, to keep going, to need more.

*Kathryn Bernard Bloomquist*

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Untitled



Medium: Markers

*Jenny Lagergren*

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### A Walk on Rock

Flip upside down  
to see worms  
in lines of gray,  
singing colors gently down.  
It's humming season.

I slip naked feet over  
rocks cased in rainwater.  
A giant nearby shovels  
landscape left. The  
smell trips me. I fall down  
woods and worlds over,  
skin a knee  
scratch a rock.  
This, Limestone.  
This one, a Mississippian.

Mid-meadow water flows to  
a creek murky and shallow  
passes a sign,  
“Pregnant Women Should Not Eat Fish”  
waters fouled,  
solvent, oil.

Early epochs of gray  
and white sky  
spot my shadow.  
A starved tree stretches toward  
the mute campsite,  
a tent made of stone.  
It touches a pile of asphalt,  
rocks the giant's men  
use to build  
concrete roads to  
unimportant towns.

*Darlene Pagán*

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Reflection

Midnight and still August hot  
when my mother comes home  
undresses herself and then me  
before the mirror. With charcoal eyeliner  
in hand, we close our left eyes to our bodies  
and draw only their central outlines:  
necks, breasts, stomachs,  
and the soft and softer downs  
of hair below, where our hands tremble  
with laughter against the glass.

We paint in with lipsticks and shadows  
these perfect, limbless shapes  
as they float, immune from the pains  
and aches of growth and of having grown  
brittle; of having not yet been touched  
and of having been touched too often  
roughly. In Raisin Red, mother's breasts  
blaze forth with sparkling gray nipples  
to guide them, while my entire front  
stays a solid, flatter, Early Morning pink.

Perhaps sobering up, she stops,  
stares at the me in the mirror  
with its thinner, even strokes, and then  
at hers with its long, sagging curves  
and frowns as she caresses them,  
until, with her surgeon's knife finger,  
she throws her head back to laugh  
and carves some of the paint  
from her hips and wipes it onto her real  
stomach. I watch in wonder  
where the lines and colors meet  
and meld, but especially where mother's  
sloppy hand makes them flee and smear,  
into two unrecognizable bodies.

*Steve Werkmeister*

---

Cusp

Half a century after  
my mother's grandparents  
crossed the Mexican desert  
and settled up north  
on a desert of grass,  
the spicy red simmer  
of *mole con pollo*  
drafted from the kitchen  
and settled on the daybeds,  
barstools and end tables  
of the split-level home  
my grandma now owned.  
In tube socks and sweats  
we'd all gathered around  
to watch on TV  
the Huskers and Sooners  
play college ball.  
It was the cusp of winter.  
Cat Stevens albums  
mixed with mariachi,  
and my uncle proclaimed  
on Dickens and Ché  
and social respondents.  
Toreador and bull,  
cinnamon and black,  
taut before death,  
hung framed in the hall,  
strange as the saints  
on the spare bedroom walls.  
My cousins and I  
slipped out to play  
a last baseball game  
before the snows came  
and the last gasps of autumn  
were smothered in white.

Karen Lavery

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Dear John

*Lyons Township High School North Campus was awash in spectators early yesterday morning as fire gutted the interior of the main building. Most of the campus' 2000 students were buzzing around its perimeter like territorial wasps, nudging and pointing.—Oh my God! Did you see that window just burst up there?! Over there...on the third floor! —Sh\_. That's one mother of a fire. That sucker must be shooting twenty feet. —Look! Someone's trapped in the science lab. No sh\_tin.' I saw a face up there a second ago! Tides of agitated flame slapped the cool January air in constant ebb and flow from windows on every floor. Rumour is circulating that Jesse Durham started it.*

That's how I imagine my article for the *Lyons Gazette* would start, if I were to write it. I love to write. I have this habit of looking at the world through the filter of a potential news story, and I practice clips constantly in my head. I always had planned to use journalism to expose crimes against the planet someday. But now I don't know. Now means only this pathetic Chicago suburb, and the arson. My name, by the way, is William Rafferty; I go by "Rafe." But perhaps I better back up and explain since, really, I'm responsible for the fire.

Jesse Durham was a senior here, before he disappeared a week ago, in the middle of the school year. He was a bright student, but flawed. He cared too much what people thought of him, or maybe too little. Anyway, whichever, it caused him to walk around with a ready scowl. His hands were always tucked deep into his jeans pockets, and he kept his shoulders hunched, like a permanent shrug. He had stopped cutting his hair sometime during junior year (and stopped washing it as often as he should, if you ask me), so he usually hung it in a hippie ponytail, loosely bound. It worked on him. I had tried growing mine out freshman year, but a horrific frizz took over; and with my large eyes, I looked like a refugee from ECT (as my dad used to tease). Or forever startled. Either way, the Mod Squad thing wasn't for me.

Jesse was my lab partner for chemistry before he took off. That's why I can't picture his starting that fire; he was inept with the Bunsen burner. He'd hold the striker cautiously and flinch when the flame hissed to life. He basically let me handle the thing altogether. Afraid of fire is my guess. But I often was guessing with Jesse. He was a puzzle to me, a jigsaw with some of the pieces hidden. I like to put people at ease, and he would lighten up around me. So I could see the

humor and warmth beneath the brooding. And since I was a reporter for the *Gazette*, I had this idea that maybe I could draw him out a little, get a profile for my column, 'Meet This Senior.' Plus, I liked him. And he seemed to like me well enough. We often grabbed a soda after class, talked.

I told him about my sisters, the older's nagging ways before she left home for UCLA (our mother's alma mater), the younger's cleverness. About my wish to fill the house with animals. How Sasha's allergy to fur limits the family to a salt-water tank filled with anemones and bright-orange clownfish and bi-colored Dr. Suess-like gobies with shy and intelligent eyes, which I take care of. About how pissy I get with people who are too lazy to recycle. About my dread that I'll be alive still when the earth finally scrapes us off its surface like mold. About my goals to go to Berkeley and study ecology, to sail around the world in my own schooner one day. Jesse always would watch my face. His blue eyes had a strange smoky tint as he listened, contemplative. Then he'd look away and nod softly, like an old soul who knows it all already.

Jesse, I found out, has three older brothers. Gorillas, he called them. I forget their names, so I just think of them as GI Joe, Jack and Jim, because they each went into the military in turn after graduating from here. Jesse planned to break tradition. Just as well. He looked thin, fragile; he would have gotten clobbered. Plus, he was already battling it out, inside.

He also had a sister, a year younger, but she died when he was three. An accident with a pot of boiling water. Jesse had knocked the handle with his orange plastic bat as he sped by, and the pot teetered off its perch. Gloria had been following behind; she went into shock and didn't make it. I remember when he told me about it. We were goofing off by the train station. (The station is a historic structure with sturdy stone walls--about four feet high and two feet wide--set around it like a pair of square brackets. Curving pillars reach to a high ceiling. The whole thing sits like a miniature castle at the end of Stone Ave. I love it.) Teenagers were slouched against the walls in clusters, smoking cigarette after cigarette as they eyed each other sullenly. Jesse had a Marlboro cupped in his hand as he climbed a wall and jumped from one side of the pillar to the other and back, then paused to lift up and down on his toes like a shaggy ballerina. The air had that moist autumn taste that always makes me think of celery, that crisp sound as you bite into it, and the afternoon sun was warm on my face as I leaned back against the cold stone wall and closed my eyes, soaking it in.

I felt Jesse lean over me from his perch. —Drag, Rafe?

I opened my eyes and saw the Marlboro extended.

—Nah, better not. Running is work enough as it is.

Jesse shrugged. —Whatever.

He plopped down with his back against the pillar, his long legs stretched in front of him. I could hear the inhale/exhale of his breath behind me as he finished off the cigarette, then flicked it to the ground. I stooped to pick it up, shaking my head.

—You know, man, if you smokers would just throw these things where they belong . . .

Jesse interrupted me with a nudge.

—Hey, Rafe. Isn't that your girlfriend over there? Sarafina What's-Her-Face?

I followed his gaze. Sarafina Kaputi (as she had re-named herself) was coming out of the 1st National Bank on the other side of Burlington. She was Nephrodite, queenly and aloof and secret. She wore African garb with beaded braids framing her proud face. She works at the photography studio, and I had convinced my mother once to get Sasha's 8th grade graduation pictures done there — even though it would have been much cheaper over at Penny's — just so that I could watch her move while I played the doting older brother. Sarafina had failed to be impressed. I sighed as she disappeared into Wykopf's Studio a half block down from the bank. Jesse lit up again. The smoke smelled strangely familiar, like a lost memory.

—Too old for me, Jess. I have a responsibility to all those desperate women of our generation, you know?

—Yeah, a responsibility to not inflict your no-brain personality on them.

I laughed and jumped up onto the wall, then leaned over him.

—Oh yeah? Yeah? Wanna try saying that again, hippie-boy?

Jesse shook in mock terror, arms flung over his head. —Don't kill me, Boss! Don't kill me!

Just then a siren sounded nearby. An ambulance shot down Hillgrove, just across the tracks. I felt a pang as I listened to its shrill whine, like a futile call-to-arms. As it faded I looked down at Jesse. He was acting near catatonic, his eyes fixed on the burning bulb of his cigarette. His expression was wide-open, sort of sad and soft and incredulous. Instinctively I looked around. He'd be embarrassed if anyone noticed.

—Hey, Jess, man. You there?

When he didn't respond I squatted down to be closer to him.

—Hey, bud. Wanna land back on earth?

Jesse looked lost, fragile, like a child. But only for an instant. Then he snapped into a scowl and took a long drag off the Marlboro.

—I ever tell you I had a sister?

I blinked and sat back, facing him, arms curved around my knees.

—Say what?

—Sister. I had a fuckin' sister, I said.

I looked down at my fingers, tightly interlaced, and rubbed one

thumb against the other. Jesse's mood shift made me uncomfortable. But I was dying to know the story.

—So. . . what happened to her?

Jesse leaned his head back and closed his eyes, exhaling smoke through his nose like a pro, or an addict, rather. I pictured the filthy fog creeping through his blood vessels like a nightmare, a hellish ghoul pouncing on every pure globule of oxygen and snuffing it out.

—I killed her.

The back of my neck turned AC/DC and the current crept down my spine then up again, saturating my scalp with tiny tingly fingers. Involuntarily, I looked behind me. Then I snorted, just to cover my tracks.

—Yeah right, Jess. You tryin' to pull a Lizzie Borden? Maybe a Morrison "This Is The End"? Let me guess, you axed your whole family over some stale Cheet-ohs, right?

Jesse just moaned softly, eyes still shut. He started rocking his knees back and forth while the rest of his body stayed frozen. The cherry of his Marlboro was burnt down dangerously close to his fingers, a crooked finger of unflicked ash jutting out from it. I reached over and took it. He didn't seem to notice.

—Hey, bud. I was just kidding. What really happened to her? Come on, I'm listening now. Tell me.

He stopped rocking and sighed, then opened his eyes. They looked feverish, too bright, like detonated suns against dark-blue skies. Concerned—and a bit scared, if you want to know the truth. I reached over and lightly punched his thigh. —Hey it's OK.

That's when he told me about the accident, about the screams and sirens and the way his father went all quiet and cold on him. His eyes looked stiff with pain as he told me, as if his mind was stuck on a continuous instant replay of the horrible moment after his sister shrieked when her skin turned a mottled red and white and her eyes stared off into nothingness, and he, pushed aside and momentarily forgotten, just kept whispering "Glory, Glory, Glory" over and over into her unresponsive, burnt body. His mother, he said, was a blur of sobs and reassurances and smiles and hysterical crying until Jesse was about six. After that she went mostly flat, except for occasional fits of conspiratorial whispering when she tucked him into bed, or later, when he was too old for tucking, when she'd lean over his bed in the middle of the night and wake him with her hoarse babbling. It was mostly about her marriage, about its fishbowl existence, as if all the eyes of LaGrange were watching for the moment it would go belly up. Jesse would pat her arm wordlessly.

I felt embarrassed, awkward confronted with so much pain and couldn't help rehearsing a by-line in my head; it relieves the strain. *Family thrown in turmoil after traumatic death of only daughter. Bonds of*

*blood go loose-jointed. Minds become unbinged. Guilt simmers through the house like a murderous stew. Old Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_, long-time neighbor, is quoted as saying that she expects the harsh Mr. Durham to take a permanent hike sometime soon.*

Or something like that. But I stayed attentive on the outside. I didn't want to hurt Jesse. It seemed to help him to talk about it. His face relaxed and his eyes returned to a calmer, placid blue. I told him—Hey, it wasn't your fault. It was an accident. You were just being a kid, ya know?

He just nodded and lit up again.

Jesse didn't seem to hang around much with anyone. I seemed like his only friend, but we didn't hang all that much, just recognized something familiar in the other. We were not into the team sport thing much, though he got teased more for that because of his smaller size. I have lots of friends, though, and I think he felt connected through me. I, on the other hand, liked his tragic energy. The black t-shirt and jeans and hand-me-down combat boots. His loner intensity and introverted, perturbed gaze, as if he were Sartre incarnate. The angular precision of his body, like a starving artist. The writer in me was jealous.

I heard that he had had a buddy from over at Brookfield High last year. Amy Gowan had seen them together over at Poppin' Fresh Pies, laughing. They'd lean in close to whisper, heads bowed over their meringue, eyes taking in a different customer each time, then erupt into hysterics, overkill, as if they were high. But when I asked Jesse about him in lab once, he just waved a hand in my direction. He stayed hunched on the next stool, his eyes glued to the blue heat of the Bunsen burner, and didn't say a word. So I didn't press.

He didn't seem to date, either. He had had the same girlfriend freshman and part of sophomore years; I remember them from a couple of the dances, huddled together in a corner and awkwardly eyeing the crowd. After she dumped him he didn't seem to want to try again. But since he never really socialized--period--it made sense to me. More tragedy. I figured he probably carried a torch for some serious type who reads Sylvia Plath and Dante, and he was too anemic socially to approach her.

I've been to Jesse's house a couple of times. The first time was toward the beginning of the school year; summer still had her fingers in everything. I like the house. It's a large stucco on the corner with an L-shaped lawn that runs down one side, then side-steps into a sudden garden, lush, as if a greenhouse had its walls just lifted from sight, leaving the vegetation exposed. The air around it was sweet and cool. We had stood on one of the flagstones that tiptoes through it and breathed in its gravid smell. It occurred to me that Jesse's mom must tend to it in fits of passion (fits being her only activation device) in homage to her dead daughter, like an elaborate grave. I could picture her bending over a cluster of Baby's Breath, patting mulch around

their spindly legs, a specter of chubby legs tottering alongside. It made me sad. Mother waters dense garden with tears for dead daughter. A ghostly chill inhabits the small plot as the sweet-milk odor of baby skin settles on the leaves and stems of the scarlet honeysuckle vines.

A basketball hoop hangs over the driveway--no doubt lonely in the absence of the gorillas. Jesse and I hadn't been above playing a couple of rounds of "a-m-o-e-b-a" and "h-o-r-s-e-s-h-i-t" however. (I was an amoeba, but Jesse lost the second game.) Jesse had a great overhead shot from the far corner, which surprised me, but I could get him on a left hook from about anywhere on the drive.

The second--and last--time I went was last week, the day before Jesse disappeared. I hadn't gone to his house to hang. He had something he wanted to give me, an envelope that I wasn't to open until 'the time was right,' till he told me that it was safe to open it and read the contents. I had been sitting on the curb in front of Van's drug store, Coke in hand; Jesse had been pacing in front of me on the street, agitated, his boots crunching the gravel. But he often paced with nervous energy, and I never commented. He had stopped suddenly and leaned over me. —Come on, I want to show you something. And so there we were at his house again. The garden was a ghost of its former self, even though the winter was mild. Bare stems shot up all over like accusing fingers, desolate, abandoned.

I didn't go inside. —The old man's home, Jesse had said. Mr. Durham was retired from his position as an upper-management-something at Quaker Oats. So his bitter brooding pulsed through the house most days now, suffocating the air with tension. His dad's only releases, Jesse told me, were his 4 o'clock finger of Bourbon, and the piano, which he, of course, pounced on. He was incapable of caressing the ivory planks, or anything. So, I sprawled on the front lawn under the Oak tree and waited. The air smelled crisp and clean, like linen just off the line. Jesse came out a bit later. He paused before approaching me, holding the envelope in one hand and tapping it hard against the other, intent, like some aggressive palmist. He wouldn't look me in the eye when he finally handed it over.

—Promise you'll wait to read this.

My curiosity was boiling over.

—I promise.

I chewed over the quandary Jesse had put me in as I walked home that day, eager for a mystery, irritated by the wait, like some test. I couldn't imagine what could be in there to make him so anxious. The possibilities became fantastic. The envelope grew in promise. I bounced between delight, then disgust for my dramatic impulse to build an explosion out of what was most likely a dud, maybe some flat piece of poetry he wrote that he'd hope, no doubt, to publish in the paper.

But as I turned the corner onto Ogden Ave., I knew in my bones that whatever it was, it was big, parturient.

I ran the last mile. Part of my daily routine. But I felt strangely self-conscious. *Undiscovered ace reporter races to his office, clutching the news-breaking story nestled within the unmarked envelope. Its edges curl around like a scroll. He is Byzantine messenger heading to the battle lines to deliver a life-or-death proclamation. (All he needs is ivy wound about his head instead of his trademark ratty bandana.)* I was sure that Jesse wouldn't really care if I opened the envelope early, just so I acted as if I hadn't. At least, that was my rationalization as I slid my finger under the lip and worked it open as soon as I got home. I wish to God I had waited. Inside the envelope was a note attached to a letter. The note read as follows:

Rafe,

*You had asked once about my friend from Brookfield High (named John, by the way). I wasn't ready to spill my guts at the time, but I guess you're now the only friend I've got, and I decided to trust you. Hell, I'd kick myself if I never tried. "Life's too short," as they say, right? Anyway, I've skipped town, as you know since I would have called you before now to tell you to open this envelope! But I'll be in touch again--after you've had time to digest the letter. I just need to stay away for a while and clear my head. (And don't worry about my mom; I let her know, too.) School's a drag and my family ... well, you know all about them, don't you. I've complained enough! So, anyway, this letter I wrote (but never sent for reasons which will become obvious) pretty much lays it all out as well as any explanation could. Plus, I'm lazy, and chicken. I don't want to work at reframing any words or experiences, and I don't want to risk your reaction just yet. So--for what it's worth...*

*And thanks for everything.*

*Your friend,  
Jesse*

My blood was churning. A confession! Maybe he murdered his friend, or together they cooked up some scam and were keeping a low profile. Maybe they're running off because of it — on the lam. No wonder he was always anxious, watching over his shoulder as if he expected the Inquisition to sneak up on him. I was a journalist; I, of course, couldn't let scruples stop me from pursuing a lead, right? These were my thoughts as I buried the voice of good faith, unsuccessfully. The letter still lay folded on the bed beside me; I just couldn't bring myself to touch it after all.

Finally, I did put it away for a while, slid it into my dresser drawer. *Your friend* made my face go hot with shame. He thought of me as his only friend. He trusted me; he seemed hesitant to do so. I hated my impatience.

I grabbed my social bible, *Native Son*, from where I last tossed it onto one of the many bookshelves that line my south wall and flopped down onto the blue carpet to read. I stroked the soft fibers cushioned under me (this never fails to soothe me) and re-read the part where poor hounded Bigger shoves the milk-skinned Mary Dalton into the basement furnace, an act of desperation, not malice — she was already (and accidentally) dead. I replaced Bigger in my mind with Jesse. I envisioned his lanky body grappling with John's dead one, his face flushed and running with sweat. I could see him stick a pasty arm into the metal mouth, slapping it against the stoked wall of heat, then give a mighty heave. I could smell panic soaking his skin, and something else mixed in ... odd delight. I could hear the crackling frenzy of the fire as it popped, hissed and hummed over its meal. Then I pictured John suddenly shrink into Gloria, small arms, legs, neck contorted from shock. I decided it was time to put the book away and go eat; I needed to shelve Jesse and the letter.

By the time I finished dinner, however, I had convinced myself that I could hide my indiscretion from Jesse. Besides, I honestly didn't care by then. I had to know what was in the letter. So, I climbed the attic steps to my bedroom, stomping out my doubts on the wooden planks, and closed the door on the prying eyes of my sister, Sasha, who had noticed my distraction during supper and was scrutinizing me. Her golden face peered around the corner from the landing as I shut and latched the door. I gave her a wink before shutting her out and put my finger to my lips, as if we were in collusion; she hates being left out of things. Then I put on some Billie Holiday, loud, and lit some Sandalwood. My room filled with a brooding that reminded me of Jesse. This eased my guilt some, as if he would surely impart permission were he there. I pictured his long fingers stretching through the smoke in unspoken benediction. Then I shook my head and laughed at myself. —Yeah, right, Rafe. He'd be pissed, and you know it.

I snatched up the letter and stretched across my bed.

*Sept. 23, '79*

*Dear John,*

*Oh, I miss you, man. I could have used you after school today. Mr. Fremont...you remember him from my sophomore year? That bald, flesh-eating, rubber-gut, hook-nosed bastard that smells like herring? Well, they transferred him to North, and he remembers me. Anyway, I'm walking down the hall humming under my breath, still wet from swim class; and he's leaning against a locker like he's all cool, talking to some of those tight-assed jocks that are always proving nothing, and he right away starts in on me. —They let you get wet and slick on school property, faggot? —You leave your boyfriend on the locker room floor, bitch? And on, all the while those jocks just laughing and snorting their hatred at me like I was some piece of*

*shit they're trying to flick off their finger. I can't believe they let a teacher talk like that, but then who's to know? But him and me and those asshole jocks. I can't stand it, John! I hate them! I hate me when they do that! I can't make them stop, and I can't tell anyone because who would believe it? And anyway, then they'd know. Then they could stare and sneer, too. Then they could do to me what they did to you. No thank you. I wish things were different. I wish you were still here. I just don't want to feel so alone anymore. I can't think of anyone else to talk to...but you, and you're not answering much these days. I tell you, John, more times than I can count I wish I had gone into the ground with you. I really was going to, was aching to. Had one of the gorilla's guns in my hand. It's just...my mom's screams, the sirens...I just couldn't do it, man. But it would have been quite romantic, don't you think? Like Romeo and Juliet...well, sort of. Ha ha.*

*I ache for you, man. Your smile. Your laugh ringing out all over. Your touch. Touch. Everything I touch seems to die, you know? If I hadn't been late that night, you at that fuckin' park, alone. God, John. Those bastards never would have gotten a hold of you, you know? I had just been fuckin' on time and just once did one fuckin' thing right in my life, we would have been out of there and you alive. I've rehearsed that in my head more times than I can count. Each time I feel this rage boil over me and my head gets tight and my stomach sick. It's a nightmare, John. A pressure cooker in my brain.*

*Sometimes when it's really bad (and I can see you frown at this, but even you couldn't understand) I take my Marlboro and bring it closer and closer to my skin, just watching its red, glowing eye draw closer to my lily-white-ass skin, feeling its heat get hotter and hotter until, finally--SIZZLE--it makes contact. Then I see how long I can bear it. It relieves the pressure. Stops the seething from burning up INside, you know? I do it to my hips, soles of my feet, places no one would see. Whatever. I don't care.*

*If only I could find another boyfriend like you. Even just a friend. Someone to talk to, be myself with.*

*I HATE it here without you.*

*What am I gonna do??!*

*Yours always,  
Jesse*

In Chem lab the next day, I crossed the room and sat next to Janice. In my peripheral vision I saw Jesse's puzzled gaze widen into horror, then harden. He fumbled his way to Mr. Brandon's desk and asked to see the nurse. I thought I was going to be sick. But I just stayed on that stool, tight, hard, head bent, a stool extension, a hangnail. I couldn't face Jesse right then; I couldn't face myself. I just needed a little space to puzzle things out. That's the last anyone saw of him until two days later, early dawn the morning of the fire, when Kevin and Pete McDowell--out jogging--claim to have seen him slipping into the west entrance.

I know that I let him down. Worse. I terrified him with my rejection. I could tell anyone. I could print his letter in the *Gazette*. How could he know? How could I tell him what really had repulsed me? Only now can I tell myself even.

My fascination with Jesse has increased with the revelation in the letter. He grew more palpable, tangible. I could taste him in my mouth, feel him rolling through my veins like an explosion. He became a dark, boiling mystery. My pulse raced as I imagined him whispering dear Rafe, his breath hot against my ear. I could smell his musky odor underneath the incense, clinging to my hair, burning my skin. I was terrified by this subterranean desire that had been swirling around all along, pushing up against the hatch of my resistance. I had been fighting to keep it down, and now it was crashing through me. And I hated myself for it.

I thought I hated him, thought the whole school would see through him to me, to my flushed curiosity. I could hear them in my head, laughing, calling me *William Faggerty*. I could imagine the headline. *The Gazette's own William Rafferty in love with loner boy, Jesse Durham. The twitterpated Rafe has resigned his post in order to devote... I dreaded the idea of a lecture from my mom's priest. You'll burn in eternal damnation if you don't turn...* So I blamed him; I shunned him. It was a knee-jerk reaction to save myself. I flipped off all switches that connected me to him. I guess his juice backed up, and he blew a fuse.

I know that's why he started the fire, why he chose the science lab with its Bunsen burners as the place to make his last stand. I hope I'm wrong, but I know that was Jesse's face up there, peering through the smoke at those of us gathered below, flames licking the interior around him, the brick structure his private layer of hell. Until the gas exploded and everything crashed down on him.

It's been three days, and still there's no definite word on the identity of the charred bones they had found. Maybe they're waiting to locate and notify the GI J's overseas of their brother's death, or maybe they're waiting to implicate him in the arson. I don't know. I, of course, never will write a by-line about the fire, about Jesse. The juniors and seniors were moved to South Campus to juggle classroom time with the freshmen and sophomores while the damage is repaired. But I resigned my post on the *Gazette* and dropped out of school. Jesse was right; it's a drag. And I need time to clear my head. I'm considering joining the Peace Corps. Or even the Navy. I know it's full of gorillas and tight-assed jocks; but at least I would get to sail around the world perhaps, even if not by schooner, and not in my own boat.

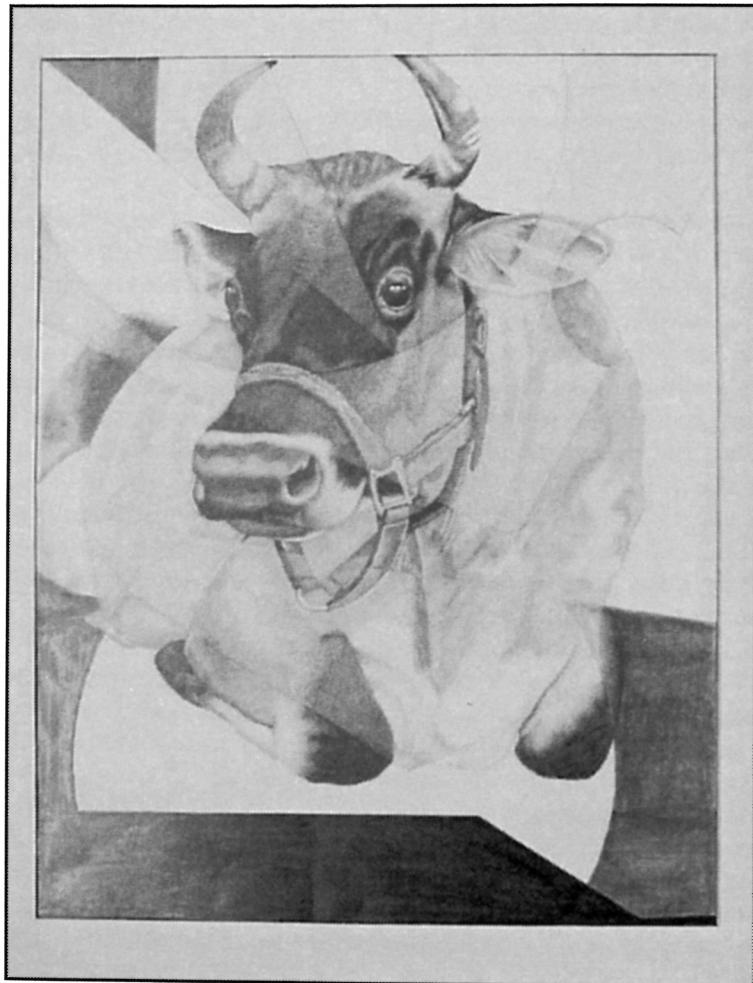
I can't stop thinking about Mrs. Durham, her youngest son now taken from her, too. I remember that early autumn garden, and I picture her bent over a bed of white mums, babbling hoarsely as she prunes. Behind her, translucent and sprayed with dandelion dust, I

imagine a pair of chubby feet joined by a pair of charred army boots, stomping together in some ghostly dance. Perhaps John would be there, too, waiting close beside.

*Jessica Shaw*

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A Fragmented Unity



Medium: Pencil

*Sheyene Foster*

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## The Crazy Mirror of Language

*An Interview with Stan Sanvel Rubin*

SF: You say in an introduction to your book, *The Post-Confessionals*, "More than anything else, the question that preoccupies these poets and identifies them as post-confessional, is the question of sincerity. The 'I' is cast into suspicion." Do you see this kind of sincerity as a preoccupation of your own work?

SR: I don't think sincerity is the preoccupation necessarily. I won't reiterate the argument I made in that book, but I was writing about a generation of writers who were in reaction to something, to the extreme what seemed to be self-revelation of the confessionals. The reason the question gives me pause immediately is that I don't think of it, and I haven't thought of it, as a special project of mine to try to be sincere. But, on the other hand, the concept of authenticity goes very deep for me. I want the words to be authentic. I want to say the words I mean to say. I want it to be the exact right word. What relationship that word has to any concept of truth, opens up a lot of other questions. Some of us were talking about this issue this morning at breakfast in terms of what the line is between creative nonfiction and fiction—you can ask that to Judith Kitchen—but I think that question does apply to poets. I will say this: It's in the discourse right now, the conversation about authenticity and sincerity in poetry. What is poetry for? And I must admit I'm always instantly suspicious when I hear people formulate a question such as, "What is art for? What is its purpose?" Though it's a question which will always be asked and has often been asked very richly, it worries me because it always implies that somebody thinks he or she has a reason, the answer to what art is for, and that always bothers me.

SF: Do you consider yourself a post-confessional?

SR: I think, in all honesty, I am. I actually didn't think of myself when I was writing that, I was looking at these writers, but I suppose as I historically defined it I am, obviously. I think we need to understand that you can't easily write the truth of yourself. Language throws back reflections of the self in intricate ways. You have to be open to language, the kind of crazy mirror it is. You have to be open to fragments of truth about yourself and your being in the world that it will present you. And you have to try to see the things language presents you clearly, I think. That is, without distorting it with images of the

self you would like to find there or with ideas, or ideologies, or prescriptions of truth that you start out with and hope you can impose on language. I'm one of the kinds of poets who believe that language will show you things if you're open to it.

And, I believe in putting the individual imagination and individual voice into writing. I'm not going to be arrogant and say back into writing; it's certainly there. But I'm on the side, if there is a side, that believes if you can't write sharply and interestingly out of what the self reveals to you, you probably can't write interestingly or honestly about other things. I'm not saying everyone should go writing about themselves, but I do tell beginning students, the first thing I want from you is a sentence starting with "I." If you can't write an honest, interesting, verbally alive sentence with "I" out of your own life, I really don't care what you're going to write about large issues like war, peace, AIDS, ecology. I pretty much know how you feel on those issues. I pretty much feel the same way. Why should I care, unless you can interest me? So I am on this side that wants to put the self in poetry. It doesn't have to be the "I." I certainly don't put the "I" in all my poems, but it's my inner life, it's my imaginative life, it's my interaction with the world and with language. And, to that extent, I am post-confessional in some sense, in that I'm not attempting to just render my life—not that the confessionalists did this either—as the material or to justify why it should matter.

But I am attempting not to evade the self. I'm trying to find my own strategy, as I think the post-confessionalists have to, for getting the inner imagination, the inner space of language, the inner space of experience, to be what drives my encounter with poetry and with language. But not to have the facts of my life, or my emotional life, be the center. And that presents a lot of subtle, intricate, and to me very worthy challenges. It's sort of like constantly turning language around and around like a multifaceted ball, and seeing the many reflections it gives you. And you wonder sometimes if there is a center there. Is there a central emotional truth as some of the confessional poems seem to claim? But I don't think you can evade that struggle. You can't just go right through language as if you could permeate it to some important topic, such as, "This isn't me speaking. This is all of the American Indians speaking. This is nature." You can't do that. You can only come to it an inch at a time, angle by angle, as you honestly encounter language.

SF: You've been involved with the Brockport Writers Forum for a number of years and you've interviewed a great number of contemporary poets, as well as writers in other genres. How do you see this consistent dialog affecting your work?

SR: I think that, obviously, I must have been affected. I know some of my interviews are better than others. I do the best I can on the spot. I think I'm a pretty good objective interviewer. I keep a framework going in my own mind some distance from the conversation. Sometimes I know I got to places, and if I feel it was a really good conversation, it may be subjective to a certain extent. The things that were said were things that resonated in me. Now, exactly how this has affected me, I can't say, except quickly to suggest that just as when you are a teacher or judge contests and you see a lot of others' work, you always become chastened because you're aware of how much stuff is out there, how much of it sounds the same, how much of it sounds a lot like you, how much of what you think you're doing might sound uncomfortably like what a lot of other people are doing. So these conversations must have affected me, and hopefully, in broadening my sense of the things that are possible.

SF: Who was the most surprising writer you ever interviewed?

SR: Most surprising writer. You know, I've thought a little bit about that question, but I don't have a pat answer. There were writers who were surprising in terms of acting up in certain ways. Lawrence Ferlinghetti many years ago came into the studio and started throwing leaves around that he had gathered. And we had three cameras, but he really disrupted the director, who was all aghast. There are many surprises in terms of discovering the humanity and inner core of a writer, the generosity of one who maybe has a strongly identified, say political position. And in discussion the totally human basis of that may come out.

Just to take the last first, I think Marilyn Chin, whom we just had through, and I just interviewed, was a very typical surprise in the sense that this is the type of thing that you learn talking to writers. She comes in as a powerful voice for ethnic poetry, political poetry, women's poetry, and she says that the first poem that knocked her socks off was Eliot's "Pruferk." She always wanted to write a poem like "The Wasteland." So that's emblematic of the kind of surprise I have, because in academia, we sometimes talk very rigidly about these issues. We shouldn't. We should know better. But when you encounter writers, you find writers are the ones with fluid imaginations, open ears and hearts. And you know that Marilyn Chin's political position and personality have very little to do with Eliot. But, as a writer, she learned from and admired Eliot. And if we're sitting around an academic committee meeting we might get into these rigid ideas that nobody of X ethnic background could possibly learn from Y ethnic or gender background, which is not true. The whole point of teaching and the whole point of writing is that we can't imagine until we inhabit and

learn about one another's lives—not that we are excluded from one another's lives.

I'll tell you what you do find out that's not a surprise, though. Not only how passionately writers share about what they're doing, but how seriously they take the teaching activity. Even writers who say I'd rather not teach, or I'd rather be independent take very, very seriously what they're doing to and for their students.

SF: What about your responsibilities such as directing the program and the role of teaching in your writing life? Do you see these as enhancing your writing, or are they more of a distraction?

SR: I can tell you this: When I was in graduate school I made a, perhaps, foolish decision, but I made it. That I wasn't going to focus on what interested me most, contemporary poetry, modern poetry. I loved Wallace Stevens's poems, for example. I didn't understand them, still don't, but I had read everything I could, and huge amounts of it I had actually memorized when I was a college student. I remember going to school in Philadelphia, reading Wallace Stevens on the trolley. But, I made a decision that I wouldn't study Wallace Stevens, or write a dissertation on him. I had already written a senior honors thesis as an undergraduate on Wallace Stevens, and so, I decided I would go elsewhere. And I wrote my dissertation on Dickens, something far removed from my own passion. And whatever weird effects this has on your career and development, I won't go into for better or for worse, but I wanted to retain complete space of my own evolving personal response to poetry. As a teacher, I'm very open minded. I have a few preferences. I'll tell my students what my biases tend to be. But I believe there's no one right way. We all have our own methods we work out. But as a writer, and even reader myself, I wanted it not to be professional. I didn't want to have to present, as I knew I would as a teacher, what's good about William Carlos Williams, and what's good about Wallace Stevens, and what their aesthetics are, and how to appreciate them, because I want my students to appreciate things and to find their own favorites. I want to be able to retain my intuitive gut dislike of this poet, even though I know it's a great poet and I have to give lectures about that poet, I want to be able to hate that stuff. So, as a teacher I tried for a long time not to teach the thing that was closest to me, which was contemporary poetry. I've done it now for some years, and it does influence you in a good way, of course, because you're having to present stuff in the classroom to which you also have a powerful, sometimes deep emotional response. It forces you to discover new things about it. And the continual awareness of younger spirits, younger minds, and their encounters with things you may have gotten jaded about...it's wonderful. It keeps you fresh, it

keeps you alert, it helps you grow new antennae, it keeps your antennae quivering. So teaching does change you for sure.

SF: In *Lost*, on the back cover you have this statement about poetry, you say, "It comes to me often out of brooding or despair, moodiness, lostness....that's it...I guess lostness...breeds poems." And it seems as though there is this feeling of confusion and loss and sort of suppressed pain in some of your poems, both in *Lost* and *Midnight* as well, I think. How does "lostness" breed poems? Or, do you feel you were writing from that sense necessarily?

SR: Well, I mean, that's exactly right, but that book, unfortunately, is a decade plus a couple of years old and I don't think I'm writing from that exact place anymore. But I do think that vagueness was a kind of place I came from. A kind of existential uncertainty. In existentialism, "existence precedes essence" is a kind of slogan out of Sartre, so that you exist before you define yourself. And I think I was coming roughly from that place during those first books. Language would show you what you were and who you were more truly, so I wanted to stay open. And I did have some personal pain, although certainly the first book preceded it. But somewhere in there I ran into a kind of nasty divorce and that kind of thing helps you feel pain of various sorts. But I think it was just more an awareness of the loose edges of being that was informing my encounter with words. And I think what I wanted then out of words was at least two-fold. One thing I wanted out of words was to kind of feel that the word was right. The word was grounding being. That was the word in the moment, the word around which possibilities of meaning could cohere and arise. This is the true word that is given to me now, at this instant of time, so that I could be more honest about myself to myself than I ever knew I was. (Though, maybe only I would realize that because I'm not being confessional.) And secondly, I think I wanted a kind of aesthetic that I hope I still have in my work, that the words radiate possibilities. This does not mean language poetry, and it doesn't mean vagueness. But it does mean that there's not just one meaning for the word. That the word in the line catches up levels of possibilities that go along with it, like many tails connecting to a many-tailed tadpole, going this way and that way under the surface. So that if you feel more from the word than just its surface contextual meaning, you're supposed to feel that. It's supposed to ripple. When you get to the end of a poem, it sends you back to the beginning. That centers of energy radiate from some places in the poem, and that you can't get to the end and have it and you're finished.

This is why I quarrel somewhat with the overwhelmingly prevailing notion of open-ended form. It seems to me that the artist's job is to give some form to things. Now many writers, including those who

think they're open-process writers, obviously do that. I mean, even an oral performance in a bar starts somewhere and ends somewhere. The person doesn't just keep going; it would kill you. And, it doesn't usually stop short. There's a place that it stops. So I don't mean anything in terms of fixed forms necessarily. However, I do mean think that language itself has so many possibilities at all times. Being and self have so many possibilities at all times for true, and then false, and imaginative relationships to language. There are so many possibilities that I think the writer's job is to give a kind of form. I mean, I'd like the reader to experience something that feels formed enough that they want to go back and re-inhabit those places.

I used to very much think of poems as spaces. I had a line somewhere that "poems are rooms we travel through." They are a kind of place. Maybe I once used to think of it as kind of a sacred grove or ritual space, and that it shouldn't just be co-equal to life. That your job is to realize the sound body of a poem, the visual body of a poem, the experience of those words and possible meanings, so that the reader can experience it again and again in new ways. And if you just let the reader pass through, back into his or her own life, you may not have done much that's worthy in the name of art. So, that was the kind of challenge that I set for myself.

SF: So, do you see yourself as using a very conscious application of poetic tools to provide this sort of multiplicity?

SR: Not really. I mean, in truth, I know I'm using a lot of tools. I hope I've learned a lot of tools and I hope I'm good at them. And sometimes, like all writers, I will purposely play. You always play with a stanza, with line breaks. But what I hope I'm doing when I'm doing something right, feels whole, feels like it's coming from a center. As so many poets have said, it feels like it isn't quite me. My consciousness is involved and I'm playing with it consciously. But I'm not saying, "Maybe I'll use a metaphor here."

SF: It's interesting that you mention metaphor.

SR: I'm highly metaphoric in that book particularly. But I've actually tried to move away from that. There was a wonderful profusion of metaphors in there which I love. I still like reading those poems, but...

SF: Well, the first poem, "Fog" for example, is just filled with metaphors.

SR: Right. I think that shows you something about it. I did metaphor

after metaphor, not because I was naive, I hope, but because the sense that was driving me was that there isn't any truth but metaphor. Now, I also have always tried, even back then, to work against what used to be called deep image poetry. I don't think there's any one deep true image that you can realize through a metaphor, or set of metaphors. So I always tried to see if I could write a statement-oriented poetry. A poetry devoid of techniques. Bill Stafford talked about this in our first video with him back in '69, to try to write without metaphor, something that always interested me because you're always aware of the falsifying power of those things. But, unlike some writers who say that, I never believe that there is a truth you could say more truly if you didn't have metaphor. I don't believe that at all. But I would try to experiment with statement, as if the statement were a metaphor. Can you write a sharp unadorned line which itself is only a metaphor for truths that don't lie in any way behind that? Truths you can't get to any other way, instead of getting to the truth by saying it cleanly. And, after all, art is play in part. And the truths of art come out of play because of the openness and honesty and vulnerability play allows you to experience. And metaphor is a main way we play. Without metaphor, we have no language.

But I think I went far afield from your question. Of course, my technician's mind is working. I do a lot of revision. But I really believe—and teachers probably shouldn't say this—I really believe that you want to be in a state. Sometimes I help myself be ready, as we all do, by doing my own kinds of exercises. Just to keep myself writing. But I do this to try to remain in a state where I believe that when I'm working right, I might get a whole poem perfectly that doesn't need revision. And it has sometimes happened, though you'll almost always need some revision. But I would say some of my best work, even fairly complex work, has come to me in shockingly whole form. I think that's the great gift of poetry. I mean, that's the great glory that poets have always talked about, the great secret, though it's somewhat disreputable to say it today. But it's the belief that if you're keeping yourself attuned, ready, and alert, if you're practicing your skills and you're reading, sometimes by surprise, a whole wonderful work can come to you. It may need very little revision, just a little nudging here and there. Or, it might be mostly whole and then you're going to kill yourself for three months trying to get that next little part to complete it. But regardless, something like a gift came to you because you were ready. You were attuned and your skills were ready. And sometimes the mind comes in, in the revision process.

But again, what I try to do in revision—and I think many poets would agree—is to get back in touch with an inevitably later place and a different self. To reconnect with the flow that the poem created that goes beyond its moment of creation, but not to come at it from

the outside, with forks and spoons and daggers, chain saws and hacking. I always tell my students you will never be able to hack, beat, or prod a line or an image into a good poem. It just isn't going to happen. But you need to do all of this work and fruitless labor so you can internalize and synthesize a lot of skills. I tell them, don't think you're going to take this good line I told you to save, and throw the rest of the poem away. Save that image and you'll never beat it or force it into something important. But, if you keep that line, the whole thing may come to you later. And, of course, I stress the importance of revision. I don't tell them to walk around expecting poems to fall like plums into their hands. I'm just talking about that wonderful receptive state that you long for, where something smarter, richer, more rhythmically right, more complete and complex than you think you are has come to you. And that's that feeling writers have always talked about. I'm not a mystic about it, but I realize it's semi-mystical as one talks about it, as a kind of gift which comes to a writer. We recognize it isn't just a gift, but I think we recognize it's not just my life. Maybe that's another separation from the confessionalists, though if one knows the confessionalists one knows that they didn't really just write their life. They used their life and imaginings of what could be their life as a new source of material. They found a way to get new attention by writing about certain things. If Anne Sexton writes about her uterus, she knows there's a tension there. And I think it's more important what she does with that attention than whether the facts of the poem really could be related to her life.

And I'll say something else about that. There's an interesting Ted Kooser piece which was in the *Prairie Schooner* recently where Ted's kind of complaining about poets who seem to write about any kind of dramatic or melodramatic kind of occurrence and present it as if it happened to them for the sake of getting the audience's sympathy or respect. He doesn't like that because it's false, and I understand that. I know what he means. But, it seems to me, the way our culture and our credentialing come together—and this is such an American thing—we have produced this sense that if you're not some sort of celebrity, you're not real. So therefore, there may be this tendency that Ted Kooser might have been responding to, for writers young or old to have a sense that this is my life and what I'm producing shows you how much I've suffered or how fine I am. And, of course, though most of us love readings and we love to put our words out there, the predominance of readings tends to do this too. It's a one-on-one confrontation with the audience; you want them to like you or be amazed by you. You want to play them. But what I'm getting at and haven't said is this: A sense that what you're really presenting is your life for audience approval or identification may be inevitable in performance situations to some extent, but I think we should be teaching our students to read another

way. Possibly closer to something like the modernist way of reading where you know you're not reading directly the life of the writer. That doesn't mean the writer can hide. If your work is full of something somebody would consider misogyny, I don't think it makes the writer a misogynist. But certainly, it raises questions. People might then look into your life, but, I mean, that's real life. I don't think the themes that are in your work are you, but they seem to be fascinating to you. And I'm not judging you for that, but they seem to have a real connection to you. But, on the other hand, I think we have to realize that there is the mediation of language and tradition in what we do. I mean, I want you to like me, but this poem is not there to say, "Stan Rubin is so sensitive. Stan Rubin is something so much." I'm putting the poem there for you to experience the words and meanings of the poem, to internalize them, to make them your own. And so, I think right now there's a kind of pressure where that little space—which to me is the space of art, the space of craft—gets crushed.

If I'm not being too abstract and going on too much about this, I'd like to say one other thing about that. It seems to me that we're in great danger of substituting an idea or image of the life for the truth of the work. I've just acknowledged that the two are closely bound, especially in great writers. You can't say Faulkner's life had nothing to do with his work. On the other hand, what Wallace Stevens's work had to do with facts of his life is much more by opposition or inversion. So, it seems to me that if you want to say important things about the world, there's a lot of ways to say it. You know, if you want to write about ecology, write a book about ecology. If you're doing ecological poems, you've got to respect the fact that you are handling language in some way that poets handle language, whatever that is. That form and craft and the tradition of poetry have something to do with the act you're in. Otherwise, you know, you're borrowing a false glory. You're saying, "It's just so important to save the first-growth forests that my poems must therefore be important." And we understand this phenomenon, this borrowed importance phenomenon. But that's a cheap shot in a way for me to take. I mean something more serious as a teacher. Letting students think that they can borrow significance, forget that they almost never say anything new about the environment, but they think it's more important than their own lives—that practice, I think is a terrible way of keeping students from encountering their own lives. From discovering the ways language, and other writers living and dead, can help you rediscover your own life and build on that as a base from which you might say something from your own personal point of view about the environment, or another cause. In other words, we leave out a key term of encountering the craft and the language as the necessary mediator, the kind of crazy mirror that shows you truths about being that aren't just your truths.

You have to trust that the truths you discover out of your own sometimes messy, indeterminate life, are in fact, in some way, truths anyone else could inhabit and you could inhabit theirs. Otherwise, why write? If women could write only for women, or people of color could write only for people of color, there would be no communication possible. And, if what you want to say is something important about the world, but you can't say it through an honest encounter with your own being in the world, then maybe you should go research and write a documentary book, and not try to write poems.

SF: It's interesting—what you made me think of in part when you were speaking just now was Richard Hugo. "You want to risk sentimentality without being sentimental." Again, not using the poem to glorify your own life or beg sympathy, but to use your individual encounter.

SR: Right. And he had his material. He certainly had his sociological and geographical material, but he understood that he only made the material real by putting himself there. He's in his towns. He's in his landscapes. And, kind of on the side, I really think I have a view of the lyric poem. I think it is the voice of being, whatever that is. I don't mean it has to be abstract, I don't mean it has to be elitist or obscure. But, in some sense, the lyric poem makes a certain demand. It makes the demand for an inner life, an interior experience with language. It's what I call the sounding word. A word that is meant to be sounded silently in the head, fill the empty space of the body cavity, fill the being. You can utter it and then it fills air. It's between the audience and me when I utter it. It's not me talking to the audience. It's not me directing the audience on some issue. All kinds of poetry are possible, but I think you see why I say that long ago I wanted to separate my professional teaching of poetry from my own artistic encounter with poetry. So, my sense of the lyric poet is that he or she is the one who keeps alive the unitary voice of being. And it's not there for solitary or exclusive purposes. When the original Greeks would sing, there'd be a lyre, there might be a chorus, and the topics that were sung weren't just personal private topics, but it was the individual voice. And the modern version of the lyric as overheard is not overheard the way a confessional is overheard. It's overheard because other people can take it in, make it real. I believe the poet in this way keeps alive the individual voice of inner being without which who knows who we will become? I mean, maybe our destiny is to become a huge anthill all connected through wonderful electronic systems, and actually, in spite of that description, I don't quite dread that—all we've done is evolve. But I do know that the kind of poetry I relate to and my sense of language comes from the era where the word, the syllable, matters.

And if that era is gone, and maybe it is, and if we're being replaced by large systems that appear to offer us new realms of freedom, but can only give us choices as the system allows, if that's what is replacing what I think of as the interior word, the era of literacy of maybe 1,000 years, then I do wonder about what the political organization will be then. It's a matter of that screen reflecting back to you the form in some hyper space or some virtual space. And you can certainly do everything there you can do on the page. That's not my issue. I'm not naive about that at all. The internet may save books in that sense. All books can go internet, nobody has to pay for a rental place to save the books as they deteriorate physically. What I'm considering is what the status of the word is. I mean the lyric word to me is a word that can be internalized in the body, not a word that's flattened on a screen that doesn't promise or seem to demand interiority. And many of us around this conference are worrying about our students who seem to be less and less able to take words in and pay the intense inner attention to words that we'd like them to be able to. Maybe we're all idealizing our own school days. Not everyone was destined to be an English professor in our English classes either. We were the guys who did it, so we paid more attention. You know, self-selection. But you do wonder whether the very excitement of the flattened screen word—the way you can link and link anywhere, hit a highlighted thing and go there, do your own home page—whether that in some way radically cuts away the individual word from the long era of literary interior literacy that I'm talking about.

SF: I'd like to talk about your more current work.

SR: I've been doing some fiction recently—just writing it. I haven't published it yet. But I have found what I've always known to be true. That if you're doing fiction, the sustained attention it requires is a certain kind of labor that you darn well better have and make the time for. Such as your Steve Heller out there does early in the morning. I think a poet is a little luckier. Not that you don't work; you work hard. I don't mean to say I walk around and wait for a poem to be inspired. Sometimes when I get this inspiration and I realize that it's real, I might write a hundred drafts of it before it's done. But I felt there was something real there when it came to me. At least I have found that I can write poems at all kinds of odd times. You might get up and walk out of here, and I might suddenly scribble. I tend to be someone who's often grabbing little things to write stuff on. I write on a napkin while I'm driving a car. I always have these little pads that I'm scribbling on. Now, it's not a very neat way to do it—on these tiny little Post-Its all scribbled up, I can't even read my own handwriting—but the lines are constantly coming to you. That voice is there, and you can dip into it.

The craft of fiction requires enough structural sense that I think you've got to have more sustained attention.

SF: Speaking of structure, I'd like to talk again about this idea of writing the poem as a whole. Do you see that as happening more for you now than it did in years previous?

SR: No, no, no. I go through phases from time to time. Like right now I've been thinking I'm dry. I was just really writing well and suddenly in the last couple of weeks, I just suddenly realized I haven't. And part of that is the attention that goes to other things. We've been doing grant writing, committees, hiring. But I'm always re-encountering that life of language now, in me, that's real and true. Whether it's permanent or shaping, time will tell. The short answer is I go by fits and starts, but I think some of my very best poems feel as if they've almost come whole. It's something alive. You know it's alive and you want to connect to its life and work with it until it is what it's supposed to be. Not force it, but discover what it's supposed to be. And it may end up being six months until you get the last two lines. Or you may open it up and discover, hey, I could do a whole lot more with this, and really pull things together. But also, sometimes it is feeling I don't have that life in me. It isn't here. So I will force myself to sit down and play. I'll take the first thing I can think of. Or, I'll force myself to start what might be a poem. And sometimes something minor will grow out of your playful work. Sometimes it will promise more if I come back to it. Very often I'll trash or delete that stuff. I always just try to force myself to keep going. You can't just walk around waiting for inspiration. That's the key rule. All writers know the gift and the inspiration comes as the sweet reward for having kept your skills ready and your attention sharp.

Michael John O'Donnell

## Vorplay

## Cast

Fenius Blach.....	The Writer of Vorplay
Jonz.....	The Director
Jof.....	Blacklisted linguistics professor
Mia.....	Jof's girlfriend
V.....	The stalking lyricist
Raval.....	Ex-plastic surgeon turned scavenger
Facilitating Influence.....	Michael John O'Donnell

*A warm glass of port brings little repose from the angst of the workday, and by midnight, THE WRITER, Fenius Blach, spreads his tired frame across his spruce desk, eyes wide-open and bloodshot. Blach pops a few yellow pills from an unmarked bottle, then sighs. Nearby, with cigarette stabbed between thin lips is THE DIRECTOR, Jonz. He sits nervously on a mock antique barrel, feet kicking against its side, arms crossed defiantly. Unearthly gasps of air emerge from his throat. Blach sips the port and runs his fingers through his hair, from back to front. Jonz stops the incessant kicking of the barrel, smoothly maneuvers the cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other in a practiced sweep and stares at Blach who stares into the computer monitor, and into the fading word-resonance of his stage play, Vorplay-his final draft. He falls to his knees to click the machine off from under the desk and mumbles a few barely audible words to himself. The last of the radiant pixels fade, and he envisions an electronically-generated sunset. He stands and turns around to face the fully-constructed, scarcely-lit set of his stage play on the eve of its premier: a multi-media, computer-aided, technelligent, modern-day-and-beyond love story set against a backdrop of severed metaphorical synapses and unproved theories. Blach narrates his own story.*

It took ten months to get a director to even glance at my stage play, *Vorplay*. When one finally decided to give it a crack, I hesitantly agreed that it would be produced in the basement of the downtown Maryland Hotel, a turn-of-the-century firetrap with exposed wiring that streaked the length of its dimly-lit corridors. Asbestos fibers danced in the light of a fluorescent lamp, with visible carpet seams, and a strong musty odor rounding out the room's fixtures. It was providen-

tially perfect; the main character, a linguistics professor, meets his death at the hands of his stalker ex-girlfriend, programmer/web page designer/Marilyn look-a-like in the basement of a burnt-out faux castle once owned by a Keebler Foods V.P.. Cute shit—a juiced-up boy-meets-girl-during-academic-conference-girl-excites-boy-boy-overacts-says-stupid-things-seeks-12-step-HMO-approved-program-girl-digs-this-becomes-possessive-experiments-with-self-mutilation-boy-runs-scared-considers-gender-alteration-girl-stalks-boy-boy-gets-off-on-this-stalks-girl-sends-computer-viruses-over-the-net-she-starts-chain-smoking-they-have-child-she-kills-him-then-leaves...normal stuff.

The director was a young kid, early-twenties, dyed orange goatee, bandanna, a chain attached from something to something else and buried within shredded jeans. Carried a knife. He called himself Jonz. White as a sheet. Apple pie anglo, but with some tough-to-peg Swedish accent thing going on (it came out when he talked about world suffering, famine in underdeveloped nations, Baudrillard). Thin. That Train-Spotting look: gaunt, heroin. Big for awhile. He claimed to be working on his MFA, fiction, but had “taken the semester off” to “pursue more meaningful projects” and “get back to the trenches.”

“Like low-budget theater in basements?” I asked, half joking. He didn’t answer, but gave me the, listen-to-the-asshole-who’s-begging-to-get-something-produced-on-a-cheap-ass-budget look. He jettisoned a smoke ring to the ceiling of the tiny space. I watched it expand and rise into the dark, acoustically-blown ceiling of the hotel’s basement. I kept thinking about that asbestos. I read someplace that if a single fiber of the shit worms its way into your pores, it’s history—destiny with the Big C: a real hail, blood and firestorm to trumpet my delicate circuitry. I could almost feel it crawling over my skin, sniffing for an opening.

“Teasing. I’m actually working on my graduate degree, too. Jeezus, look where it’s gotten me,” I said, plunging my index finger into my mouth to mimic a hooked fish. “I’m glad you’re taking a look at *Vorplay*.” He seemed satisfied at my prostration and gave me the grand tour of what he had already perceived as the initial layout for the play’s production.

“Over here I thought I’d set up the bar. The usual shit bar stuff: cheap rum, off-brand mixers, busted neon sign objectifying women and promoting unnatural alcohol consumption, cocktail napkins twisted into that curly-cue pattern—a hybrid, retro-eighties, post-Crusades mead hall feel, with meaty wenches in golden girdles and bad teeth, pint-sized pewter mugs and martini glasses, foul-smelling peasant stand-ins, and a Starcraft game in the corner.” He scratched himself through the jeans.

“Nice touch. Perfect to symbolize the purposeful and allegorical apathy of the characters, and their desire to resurrect a forgotten era because of their own dissatisfaction with a post Generation-X vacuum.

Very culturally pastiche and identity-politics-crushing.”

“Yea, whatever,” he continued. “The phony pimento tree goes over here, the broken dryer in the corner. I had some guy record keen mechanical noises and tormented wails from the masses for the self-flagellation sequences. The chick who’ll play Mia found someone who can dye her hair mauve. The glass block partition will straddle this yellow line, and that loser you found to play Raval went ahead with the barbed wire tattoo afterall. We can bury his scene, or make him wear an armband. People’ll think it’s some self-imposed show of torment following the pestilence scene, or his personal and very heartfelt tribute to a famous celebrity found in a pool of his own vomit. I think he’s taking shit off the set, by the way. We’re missing seven candlesticks. Fucking whatever. Incidentally, the stuffed fruit bat still isn’t ready, but it should fit in nicely next to the jukebox before the coda. I’ve loaded the box with some Chieftains, Pogs, a few of the more upbeat Gregorian chants, and some Billie Holiday.”

As he continued, I only remotely paid attention. He seemed to have things reasonably under control. No, he wasn’t born and bred Broadway, but he had an eye for that funky small space, low-budget quality I was looking for; the stuff that audiences who think they’re hip, or cool, or “with it” like to see, and who want others to see them as hip or cool or “with it” in an effort to somehow prove that they’ve attained a level of something they themselves have no idea how to describe, but they simply know it when it happens type of shit, like an unplanned zone, although it usually takes someone else to tell them they’ve arrived at this point, but the person who tells them they’ve arrived has probably already been there for awhile and wants to either leave or convince the phony that it’s not worth the ride or that there’s no more room, so they give them some false steer and convince them that it’s a natural thing, like Tommy’s blindness, void of cultish followers, untainted, divine—pseudo Zen with a self-esteem chaser. The same group who swears by foreign films until the next “back to the fucking future” sequel hits the mainframe marketing juggernaut.

“...I said, do you want the oxidized brass chandelier in the corner or dangling from the middle of the stage? And remember, no candles in this one-fire code violations are a real party killer.” He fired another smoke ring to the ceiling.

“Yeah, the corner’s fine.” I stared at the mandala that hung from his neck and followed him through the rest of the space, nodding on command as he pointed, scratched his groin through his jeans, motioned wildly, gestured, condemned, or lauded everything within view. That mandala. What a bizarre irony. I couldn’t stop staring at it—like an accident scene. It was the mandala dangling from *her* neck—a red dragon with seven heads, each wearing its own crown—that first caught my attention that night a year ago...this week. She had been

the inspiration for *Vorplay*. She sat at the veneer-top bar of Lu Lu's: a red-vinyl-high-back-low-seat-ass-trap-rocco-carpeted nicotine dungeon. The lights of the Lu Lu's bar were low, the conversations lower, and everybody there looked like they either had something to hide, had something to say, or wanted others to think they had something to hide, but still say. They were an educated group, though. Grad students. Class would let out from the nearby university and they'd converge here to discuss, debate, and pretend to know something about everything from neuvo queer theory to some recently discovered genre of Russian Reader-Response. The place dripped with kitsch. But kitsch was now in, so I guess that would make it some form of anti-kitsch.

I liked how she drank her Guinness, leaving a slight, creamy mustache on her upper lip. She playfully licked at it as she took a deep drag from her cigarette. She was between two friends, the three of them sitting elbow-to-elbow, girl-giggling, chain-smoking and glancing seductively playful looks off one another. They'd kiss cheeks like girls always do in those Mentos commercials while holding their drinks and cigarettes. I stared at them for a few minutes and became absorbed into this cute, playful little feminine interplay unfolding before me in a smoky bar. She was like Queenie in Updike's "A & P": she owned the other two. Maybe it was the Goth hood she wore, the deeply-set eyes—very Euro—the high forehead, or maybe it was the way she manipulated the other two like chess pieces that got to me. I decided to do something bold, something potentially stupid, something very out of character.

No, I wasn't a bad looking guy dependent upon cheap gimmicks; just one of those guys dripping with armor who never developed a rap with women. But heaven help you if your plumbing should go out, or your cat should need surgery, I'd be there to console. I was always constantly over-analyzing shit, always waiting for the end-of-the-semester parties to saunter up to the cute brunette who I thought knew something about abstract expressionism only to find out she happened to read something about it on the way to a multi-level marketing get-together with her boyfriend who was a stock broker downtown and they both just closed escrow on some condo—their second—in the beach area. Middle class Southern California bourgeoisie types that I failed to spot because I was blinded by the power suits she wore to class and the omnipresent smile, low bangs and whisky voice that all men like but are afraid to admit. I grabbed a cocktail napkin, borrowed a pen from a colleague, and hastily jotted a message:

"Chess?" tragic1@mail.com

I gave it to the bartender, slipped him a five, and instructed him not to let her in on me as the perpetrator, then left my spot at the bar and

buried myself in a booth. He walked it over, handed it to her and shrugged his shoulders in secrecy as she asked him about the note's author. She read it carefully, which I thought was odd, then calmly swiveled around for a conspiratorial giveaway look as her friends took turns reading the simple note, themselves swiveling around. She took another draw from her cigarette, swiveled back, looked around again and put her lighter to one of the napkin's corners. Very erotic. I love women with lighters. She grinned wildly as the flames illuminated her face. Her friends hit her on the shoulder as the flames grew and the note disappeared into a pile of wriggling cocktail napkin ash. The bartender gave her a ration of shit and almost kicked the three of them out.

But she was cool. She got up to go to the bathroom and again scanned the room, once actually raking her eyes across my face, pausing, as if a certain look would spell itself out across my stranger's face. I suspected, even then, that she knew it was me. I held my stare into my tumbler of stoli/lemon twist as she walked by. She was tall, had the slight hip-swagger thing going on beneath the lycra tights—the one-foot-in-front-of-the-other-ramp-model jive, but not so phony. Hair bunched up in ponytail. She gave the door to the ladies room a gentle kick with her boot as she entered. I like women who kick things.

"...I said the design guy could only slap six medallions on the front of the faux bible. Blach, are you gripping?" He lit up another cigarette and I watched his lips move through the curling smoke. It glided over his face like dry ice on the gymnasium floor of a really tacky high school prom with a worn-out theme of *Enchantment Amidst the Mist*, or some damn thing. I must have answered as I watched him walk away, flicking his cigarette into a day-old box of drying bear claws. I thought of V:

A Week passed—no e-mails from her—and I chalked the gesture up to yet another series of failed nothing-ventured-nothing-gained feminine pursuits. Maybe it wasn't my time back from the Crusades yet. I reminded myself that the confinement and prolonged spate of bad luck encounters with women were actually contributing to the creative side of my life: keeping me indoors writing and reading literary theory when the rest of the losers were meeting for drinks with strange women, engaging in meaningless conversation, then returning to their cold, passionless lairs for sex. Vile existence. At the time, *Vorplay* was nearing the first draft stage, with this mysterious woman omnipresent in the shadows of my creative subconscious as co-creator in absentia.

But then she responded. I stared at my "you've got mail" letter icon blinking on the monitor and convinced myself that it could still be from her. To create the necessary anticipation I knew I would need to later rationalize any false hopes, though, I spent a few minutes paying bills and forcing disinterest. The message could have been from

anybody. But I prepared for the worst. Besides, I had the system down: let the woman know you could care less about them, but not too much because then they'll actually think you don't care even though you're splitting at the seams to read something as potentially insignificant as an e-mail, and don't let them think you're trying to dive into their pants even though you are, then show great offense at the very notion that they would think you'd even consider diving into their collective pants even though you would. It's like opening up a SASE after you've sent your life's work to a publisher, and just knowing by the feel of the envelope that it's another rejection letter to one of your asinine stories about scorned love and some guy named Chip who's a mechanic and came from an abusive relationship but has a great dog named Fury and an ex-girlfriend named Tina. Her first message went like this:

*to whom concern is given*

*bello i guess chess interesting this could be so unlike me but even a glitch of technophile romance seems to be just what i need in my life right now and no you wont take that the wrong way or am i in search of yet another meaningless conquest if youre unworthy we will part company now after all in real time even the jacarandas are blooming chess you say how did you know i play chess do you suspect ive come for you already*

I didn't know what to make of her message, but I liked it—women who integrate foliage into their dialogue. She had a depth that intrigued me. A fellow artist? I thought, or simply one with a sensation for sensation. I could have kicked myself for saying "chess?" but I think she found it amusing. It made me pleasantly vulnerable, challenging; women dig this. Interesting how she used the term, "real time." Her lack of punctuation and propensity for lower case showed tremendous restraint and a willingness to defy convention. She was restless, witty, seemingly on some mission. This would need gestation. The director kid caught me in the hallway behind the set:

"I hate to suggest major script changes to the work at this point, but can we sprinkle in a few more 'Fucks' into the bar scene dialogue?"

"Fuck' is overrated," I said, with a bit more steam behind it than I had intended. He did an FDR with his cigarette as I justified myself: "It's an easy way to either cop out on providing substantial dialogue, or as a crutch for writers who really aren't writers, but want you to think they have a handle on words like 'fuck', 'piss' 'vagina' 'feces' and 'bestiality'."

"Right, we'll drop the fucks...." He walked away again, his voice trailing off—something about the poor quality of the lighting—as I mentally revisited my mystery woman. Do I dare ask her name this early? How long, typically, does one wait to respond to such a potentially revealing

exchange? I scurried back to the computer and prepared my response. My return correspondence was fairly sedate. Polite, yet inquisitive:

*Dear Lycra'd Lighter Lady,*

*Don't feel bad about this being 'so unlike you.' I can't imagine it is 'like' anyone to respond to a stranger's e-mail approach based on a brief interaction in a bar. But I'm glad you took the chance, and no, I'm not generally considered "unworthy". I am rock solid, at times predictable, even concrete. It seems to be my personal crusade. I am among that milieu of burgeoning academics who frequent the bar and discuss thought, its formulation, genesis, and other things that sound more impressive than they actually are. Your rather blatant disregard (and I say this with a smile) for the language and its constructs leaves me intrigued. Naturally, as a dramatist, I think in terms of exposition, rising action, crisis, and heart-wrenching denouement. I dream of Freytag, keep my theatrical conventions cruel (hello Antonin!) and allow my actors to be inseparable from the enslavement of things and circumstances—a liberation of instinctual preoccupation with crime, angst, and a mild fingering of eroticism. Call me the new-age Knight of the Night, if you must! I am busy, so I will part for now. Your acceptance of our pending game of chess sounds smashing! Allow me an occasional reprieve. Enjoyed the torching of my message. I'm intrigued at your last line.... But how long do jacarandas bloom? HaHa!*

Three months passed before I heard from her again. At first I was concerned. Jealous? But of what? A woman with a lighter and a high forehead? Her message was cute, but harmless. She became a stranger to my memory. Besides, Vorplay was nearing completion; the director was making slight script changes, I finally secured funding (old friend of the family who had hit the Microsoft stock upswing just right), and the slow grind of self-promotion was under way—mostly flyers, small ads in the weekly, a late-night slot on K-PBS. I was exhausted, and the play was still two weeks from opening.

It was late Sunday night and I was going over some last-minute dialogue changes between the main character, Jof, and his girlfriend, Mia. He's a linguistics professor who comes under fire for heavy-handed hyphenation in his inter-office memos, mass institutionalized re-routing of pedagogical standards of diction and idiomatic foci, and obscene computer terminology on his university-sponsored website, *Accismus* ("Hex-a-Decimal" = "You're fucking me over"; "A-Placation" = "What do I need to do to get your ass back on line?"; "Gray Fuck" = "Much ado about nothing"). The conservative pools of the academic environs ultimately dismiss him for his lack of commitment to the recruitment and preliminary training of young, passionless ex-

ecutives and the long-term damage to future merges with outside profit-driven consortiums. He escapes the university's pestilence post-hoc-haste (his words), holes himself up with Mia, his web page designer girlfriend, and their nameless son in an elaborate r.v., collect disability, while he scratches out threatening letters to the media on an old Woodstock typewriter. His letters incorporate an original, although not always intentional, physical disruption of the language word play. The Woodstock's unpredictable keys would play havoc with the white space of the page. Sedate shit mostly. He railed against corporatization of the university, the West's obsession with technology, and food additives run amok. He employed words such as *Liquid-Dated* (a subversive stab at product shelf life limits) and *Mental De-sorters* (aspirin) as part of his ruse that if the FDA could only employ easily-understood words in a naturally-hyphenated structure on all product packaging it would not only save space and money, but open up a whole new study of language and its relevance to mass marketing in this pre-millennium age. Naturally, it was the subliminal content that he hoped would sabotage the host. You might call him a juggler of words. He tries to convince Mia that the Woodstock is speaking to him from another dimension of consciousness. She tells him it's time to lay off the acid, and the dialogue hits a snag.

It was at that moment that I noticed another e-mail message: "You have Mail." It split the musty silence of my workspace. It was her. I nearly knocked my brandy snifter to the floor:

*fenius...knight*

*it would appear as if this marks our brief anniversary of non-communicado  
 i have been watching you though from a distance with great admiration it  
 occurs to me that i have not told you something of myself i emphasize my  
 proclivity toward lyricism inner thoughts explored first person present tense  
 narration rare progressive case much imagination melody and emotions no i  
 dont apologize for taking so long to get back to you i have been off delivering  
 other souls worked a little saw friends places did things the usual hesitate to  
 say too much you are a dramatist interested in a friendly game of chess but  
 what kind i ask i am a lyricist hopelessly destined to the intuitive side of  
 things unseen a messenger youre the concrete planks lighting and shadows  
 from misplaced backdrops type whereas i exist as a language mise en scene  
 not confined to the stage of immediate language theres a term easily recognizable  
 but if youre looking for a reprieve then youre mistaken they all want  
 that the game of chess-narratives has begun my prize will be your play*

*V*

I couldn't believe what I was reading. It was her! V. The message ended

so abruptly. She referred to our “anniversary.” Okay, so she hadn’t forgotten my message from three months earlier, but she knew my name, for crissakes! Yes, my name was being bandied about a bit in small theatrical circles and college newspapers as the intrigue behind *Vorplay* grew, but celeb’ status was a long-shot. I was growing intrigued with her illusive, cryptic nature, her clever use of fragments, her lyrical e-mail symphonies. She seemed to know me, but kept a safe distance. My play as her prize? A messenger? Critic of the arts? I detected confidence, sarcasm. I actually became aroused. She fashioned herself a lyricist. Okay, the abstract thing is erotic. I can dig this. Yes, I got off just thinking of the sexual inter-foreplay, this looming chess narrative (as she called it) that was going on. This odd game of chess with V before *Vorplay* hit the stage might be just the diversion I needed. The play had consumed me: blood and metal, scaffolding and bone structure, the proscenium of my subconscious. I was tired and although the bugs were slowly working themselves out in the play there was something more I sought, something more plausible to my waking state. Was it that tingling-engorged-nasty-area-feeling-knot-in-the-stomach-shit-every-song-reminds-me-of-that-person-I’m-envisioning-her-in-that-undergarment-right-about-now-my-face-leaves-at-nine-be-on-it type of stuff? I sought mental repose and collected my thoughts. *Vorplay* would need attending to.

“...I said, when you refer to “beasts” in the program, what kind of “beast” are you referring to?” I waved him off as I grabbed a drying bearclaw from the pink box, brushed off the ash from its clouding glaze, and re-filled the glass of port. He walked off again, mumbling something about unions, and I revisited hardships over the last few months:

The play’s physical space and set designs were nearing completion. Hotel management briefly threw a wrench into the works by staging a banquet in the adjacent room for a Baptist weekend retreat. They nearly blew their collective spiritual gaskets when they saw the giant paper machè breast propped against the pressboard penis near the espresso bar shaped like a giant cut-a-way ass. It looked like a Woody Allen script directed by Roman Polanski. The mousy night manager had us lock the doors at night to avoid future misunderstandings. I didn’t have a problem with this. The less people knew about the inner workings of *Vorplay*, the better. Maybe word would get out about the closed set, the illusive nature and moodiness of its producer, and the macabre habits and brooding mannerisms of the play’s chain smoking director. Yea, locked sets and scant information from here on out. Besides, V was now back, seemingly possessed, and my obsessions were beginning to emerge from their dormancy.

The director took sick for a week which gave me some time to work out some of the bugs in the dialogue between Jof and his university persecutors. It helped to rehash the genesis of the play’s cre-

ation and revisit the few erotic encounters over the wire with V. I began looking at this communication, this impersonal wire/cable/plastic barrier/microchip fusion as a type of electronic diaphragm with the translucence of the monitor's screen as my scrotum to another world. A black hole. She was drawing me through this electronic conveyance of information. I studied my online theory feeds to try and put some semblance of meaning to my growing preoccupation with V, her manipulative messages, and her appealing taunts: Carnegie Melon did a study that proved Internet users were lonelier than the average joe—a certifiable decline in psychological well-being. I envisioned social scientist types holed up in their collective think-tanks spending tax payer money, lonely, unsexed, balding, coffee-sucking, low-sodium nut n' honey health bar nibbling men forcing "troubling" questions on the nature of virtual communication, its potentially incendiary aftermath, and disembodied relationships formed in cyber space. I could see them with clipboards brow-beating starving undergrads with a litany of "revealing" questions: *How much time do you spend on-line? How much time do you spend with your significant other? Do you find pleasure in on-line interaction?* Then, as satisfied allegorical information-gatherers, Depression and Loneliness, they would retreat to their dirty little R & D dens for further analysis. Plotting on scales from 1 to 3, with 3 signifying the height of depression, they would come to the grand conclusion that relationships maintained over long distances void of face-to-face contact ultimately do not provide the kind of support and reciprocity that typically contribute to a sense of happiness.

It reminded me of some far-right, puritanically-steeped sect who looked at the sexual organs as strictly a means of reproduction and that the man and woman were not even allowed to sense pleasure in the intimate touch of another's body. So a large sheet with a hole cut out in a strategically agreed upon location was used in the act of sensuality, effectively separating the lovers from the evils of intimacy. Was it this computer-as-sheet barrier that prevented V and me from proper copulation (a game of chess in the cruelest sense of the metaphor)? Why was I even fantasizing that this was a possibility? There had been no proposals, no suggestion of intimacy, yet there was an implication. "Technophile Romance," she called it—a glass sheet of denial? The link-up was the hole. Frustrating, but oddly alluring. Or was it the mirror of the monitor that was distorting my better judgment? Yes, I had fantasized about V this past year, but I had no expectations. Or had the erotic desires I envisioned manifested themselves within the circuits of the computer—a simultaneous and tentacled snaring of the first passer-by in to my Net net?—like an electronic Venus fly-trap? But now, who was the fly? Chess-narratives, she called it. I was growing ever more fatigued and confused. I must break away! She responded again:

*knight*

*have you forgotten our game your visually artistic constraints seem too limiting for an e-mail fuck my language is the real thing you are automated simulacra i will still take you but let me ask you is it possible to simulate death i take your knight knight*

*v*

I returned to LuLu's for a drink and for a bit of overheard bar-chat inspiration. Chess narratives.... I despised that term! Vorplay was basically done. There was no way I would let her distract me. One more dress rehearsal, a few prostrations before the producer, some final tweaks to the script and it would be time. What did she mean by death simulated? Was I trying to simulate death? Where was the connection? Was I running? From what? Computer screen as mirror? *The emptiness is a mirror turned toward my face. I live in a world of phantoms.*

The place was reasonably empty except for someone sitting to my left in a high-backed circular booth, smoking-only the top of the head showing. A listing aroma-therapy candle burnt slowly near the cash register, but was slowly getting its waxy ass kicked by the exhalation of cigarette smoke.

“What’ll you have?” the bartender asked. I took a drag of my cigarette, blew the smoke on to the top of the bar, watched it scatter like the ripple effect off a pond, then looked up.

“Something you probably can’t give me...knowledge, not supposition, not faith. Life has been an outrageous horror-a futile pursuit.”

“Well, why don’t we stick with a strawberry brandy?” he walked away, shaking his head.

“Yes, that’s fine,” I answered, carrying on my dialogue with the top of the bar. I had started talking to myself since the first draft of Vorplay. I thought of V and her talk of death, her aversion to my propensity for visual accuracy in the language, her eerie game of chess over the net. I wasn’t used to being challenged on this level. The language. How could she dare exist in the world of the abstract? She was still on the defensive. “Just the way I like it,” I said, and forced a stream of smoke through my nose. Vorplay was too close for outside distractions. I would need to break off this correspondence, rupture this thickening diaphragm. “This concrete knight will descend upon her lyrical bishop, then shatter each flank, slowly.” I crushed a pistachio shell into the bartop.

Just then, a flash of fast-moving femininity. I thought I saw her—the “head” I saw in the darkly-lit booth to my left. Through a cloud of cigarette smoke I thought I saw her as she stomped off toward the bathroom, laughing to herself. She gave the bathroom door a good

kick as she entered. No, it couldn't.... I waited at the bar another fifteen minutes for her to come out. I was working too hard. It couldn't be V. My V. Our anniversary, she called it. Was I so foolish as to think that she wouldn't be here? I waited for her to come out. Nothing. There was work to be done.

Opening night was only twenty-four hours away and the full dress rehearsal was chaos; two of my actors showed up late, fighting. (I found out they that had had a thing going.) The lighting guy came down with a rare strain of infantigo, the caterer suspected the egg salad may have sat too long under the hot lamps of the bar set ("we've let snakes bite us, flies sting us, wild animals eat us, heathens butcher us, women give us lice, fever devour us, and you want fresh egg salad?" He had a knack for the fantastic. I thought about offering him the vacant p.r. slot) and the producer decided that today would be a time for a visit. He was a short man, dressed in brown, with a horse face, high voice, and loved to affix nicknames to my people: *you there, with the swollen nose and the stupid grin*. Meanwhile, Jonz was getting into it with the set designer about backdrops:

*-Why do only 1/3 of your angels blow horns?*

*-It is written....*

*-And what is this supposed to represent?*

*-The Dance of Death...an alfresco.*

*-Why do you paint such nonsense?*

*-I thought it would serve to remind people that they must die.*

*-That's a pleasant thought. They'll close their eyes and stare into their programs.*

*-Oh, they'll look. A skull is more interesting to look at than a naked woman.*

I retreated to my space off-stage and flipped on the computer while Jonz read the group the riot act. I had mail. Seven straight messages would follow. V:

*knight*

*fri rented four romantic flicks last night watched them all alone took a long hot bath slept naked on satin sheets the breeze from my open window sweet with gardenias no i did not touch myself although that is possibly what you would like to read right here and not that i dont or would not consider telling you about such times in the future but last night my head was in a different light distant space i know your strategy in our game of chess narratives you must refrain from talking into bartops i will leave you now but continue our match later i will fantasize about stolen kisses meals on rooftops unexpected candlelight daisies buckets full out of the blue the usual girl fare after all the sun is closer to this part of the earth and i do have some time on my hands you will never see vorplay performed a rider on white horse takes a peace*

She tricked me! It was she who was clearly on the offensive. What did she have planned for my play? Over the next several hours, the messages came at random intervals; no rhyme or reason to their trajectory. Relentless taunting. She was on the tease trip, baiting me. But I wasn't falling for it. Damn it! I was falling for it, fast and hard. Some of the messages were flip, others serious, while others intoned a deeply disturbed obsession with her desires, her needs. But what were they? Her moves were often incalculable, her messages cryptic—a lyrical labyrinth. My counters were countered. Vorplay must survive! The messages grew provocative, overtly sexual. (I was still concerned about her lack of colons in the salutations, however—very sterile and lacking in formality). She was drawing me closer, and I was falling. I was becoming her experiment over the net, a cyber cock ring cinched too tightly. Another message:

*knight*

*abb summertime unfortunately romance at this stage is something i feel i can pencil in this shoots me down in the fugitive air space of spontaneity which i learned at one time but managed to forget as a necessary component to romance 101 even my response to this possibly romantic gesture was put off till this afternoon still I like to think i can be taught new tricks given that i'll continue our play i'll test my wings with or without moonshine theres no danger in flying too close to artificial light why must you hide in a mist of half spoken promises a red bishop declares war your move*

*v*

Jeezus Christ, what a rush! The words danced across my screen and into my brain-probed memes. It wasn't the message itself that excited me, but the way she allowed the words to speak to each other across an electronic messenger. Her words owned this beam of technology. I could see them re-scrambling, processing, deciphering thousands, no, millions of lines of code....

*ps...did i mention in one of the films the protagonist(a writer)told his female antagonist or love interest that he ordered the moon for her i fell for it teary eyed hook line sinker the cliché\_ a must by the way im hopelessly straight a few lesbian dreams that inevitably ended with a man entering the room emerging from behind a two way mirror or camera or someone pulling the mask off the woman to reveal a man like the way the villain is revealed in the end of scoobydoo you've seen me so you know what you're getting*

*v again*

I craved refuge. I purposely avoided off answering her messages. I

needed to slow her momentum. Her words were becoming obsessions. They wrapped my terminal like a blanket infected with some undetectable virus seeping through its weave awaiting human touch. Her words were thousands of excited points of light-suspended milli swirling around the resonance of my terminal—static shock waiting to leap to the nearest finger that strayed too close—a thirsty and unrelenting virus with indiscriminate tentacles of deceit and wordplay.

I left for the weekend. Old friends in San Francisco. I didn't tell them about the girl. We drank. Her name never came up in conversation, but still that resonance. We smoked. Got up late. Drank heavily. Spoke in fragments. Smoked more. Ate dim sum. Slept. Fucked. Meaningless. Didn't bathe. Finally relented. Spoke her name. Female friend tried to give me insight on feminine mind games. Jokingly, I asked, "Have you seen the devil?"

"He is all around us...there, behind you," she said. (It was a Bibi Andersson look-a-like in fuchsia clogs, vermillion nipple attachments, and torn jeans. I should have known better than to ask her. She had her own crosses to carry.) At times, I desired nothing more than to be a pleasant young man who's never had but clean thoughts, while at others.... The airport. Home. E-mail. Her:

*knight*

*in this realm questions are little more than a few extra words on the monitor  
tell me who you want to be and ill see how intrigued i am beyond my unusually frank but lengthy introduction do not inquire of god or knowledge i know not these answers a black rook brings famine*

*v*

The night of *Vorplay*'s debut, and V was on the hunt. She picked up my scent and kept on the trail. I was running. What had I done? What had I gotten myself into? Distractions were the last thing I needed. She said the play would never make it to the stage. Odd. How would she conduct her sabotage, this word sniper? I furiously scraped together a message before her next strike:

*Listen Miss V,*

*I really am enjoying these clever switchbacks, and I'm honored that you've chosen me to bounce them off. Who knows, maybe in real time we'll do more than pass each other in smoky bars! :). Do you really mean to derail my play? You would*

*have better luck with me! Hahaha. Listen, gotta go. All for now....*

*The Knight*

It didn't take her long to respond. I wondered whether she ever left the sanctuary of that incessant terminal, chasing me through a forest of circuitry. Ten minutes to curtain. I couldn't pull myself away from the terminal. I stared at the screen as I waited for the messages from V. Another:

*knight*

*faith is a torment and so is your stall did you really believe i would forget  
how the pieces in our game of chess narrative were arranged now that you  
have knocked them to the ground i will become that someone out there in the  
darkness that never appears no matter how loudly you call between us all  
these things called words i adore to take in a noun touched by your prose is  
too tangible than what i have known what i have breathed swallowed what  
i have held with and without passion in my arms my thighs my eyes the  
adjectives of one days scenic drive a cellos adverbs my delight in your ellipses  
gently draped across our white sheet canvas at last no past make me linger so  
hard on a prepositional phrase that my body quivers i rise i rise and gently i  
do not fall a pale pawn is ripe for death*

*v*

I was battling my obsession to re-visit the screen while she lay in wait. The play was beginning but I couldn't leave the allure of her lyricism. Sacrilege! Curse Jonz for having things under control! The mechanical, rote voice of the computer became an untiring refrain: *You have mail...you have mail...you have mail!* At one point, I reached for the power, but failed to close the portal with V. A simple motion, I thought. But no! Vorplay was beginning. I ran the opening scene over and over in my mind as I reached for a warm glass of port, shaking as I drank, then looking into the monitor:

*knight*

*i ride the loops of your w slide down the growl of your y catch my sweet  
mouth in an o with the intelligence of your q and then sleep like never before  
with u my clever alphabet god the solitary prize in a tangible noun is no  
longer a primary color our semiotics are like braille and i readfeel my way to  
the somatic i respond to everything i even purr persecution on the backs of  
martyred souls altered altars and snatch a pawn*

*V*

"I know I'm not delusional!" I shouted at the screen. I had yet to experience non-bizarre thought sequences. Or had I? I am experiencing things still in the realm of possibility: I see my hand, I hear the chatter of the theater crowd as they locate their seats. Yes, a crowd! Jonz knows what to do. I must keep V interested. She will take me before my work. But the words! *Vorplay* is surviving. Jonz periodically checks on me. He can't understand. He is a silhouette:

*knight*

*we pen our own spectrum stranger dear and it is true the full moon she will return and i know a billion white waves will push themselves into a billion grains of sand and a billion familiar lovers will find each others bodies in a blanket of dark but in our sweet sheet space and time these words know not the restraint of a billion only the magic of one and won let them win life on your tongue i give you words then sit back glowing read them aloud yes my words must find their way to your lips yes your teeth yes your powerful tongue yes you yield sealed catastrophic changes*

*v*

indecipherable passage of time deafening applause i stare into the monitor it is blue screen meld vorplay is complete jonz is elated there is energy here but i am on the outside or am i inside looking out limited to the company of players passing through the monitor view i see myself seated though my pixel retinae a cursorblink link with the screen you mate me but i met you severe master tell me to dance as i reach the dark to clutch your hand your flashing scythe your hourglass your seventh message is read by the lamb the play of my mind is now crushed now caught in a never ending vortex

*my knight*

*i am relentless i am stretching back arched gently rolling over in your mouth leaving you with a flavor unforgettably destructive and unknowable i taste you this way i leave you this way and for now you should know my hands are your hands on me dance with me now on the other side seven trumpets herald our entrance and delete is only a key away check and mate*

*your v*

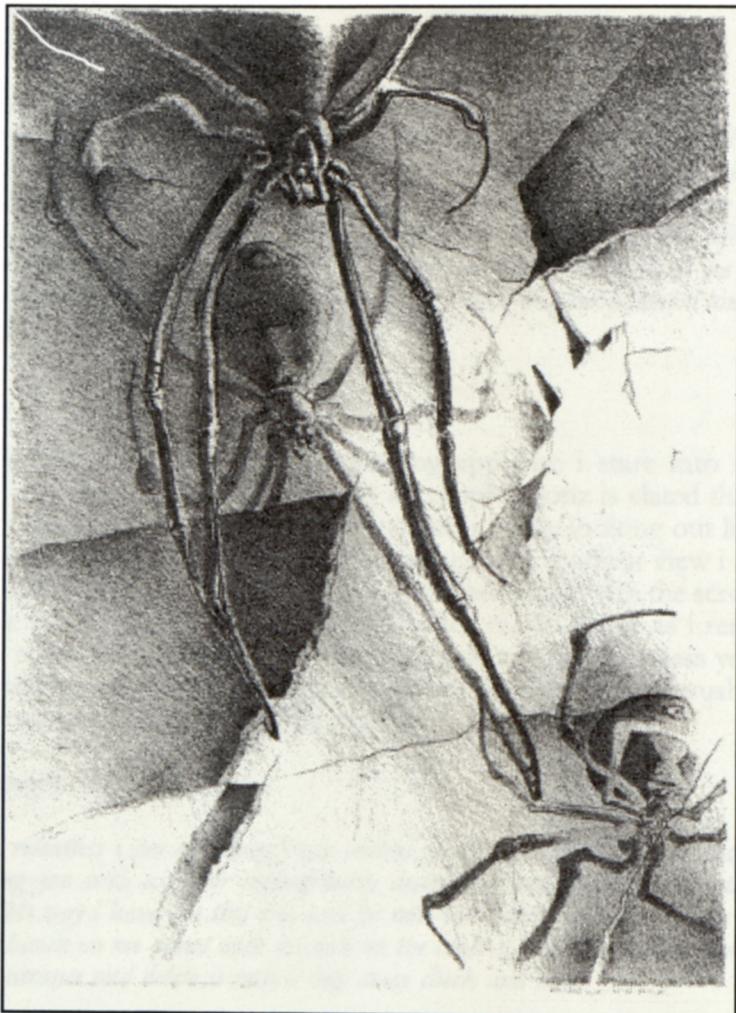
**THE WRITER, Fenius Blach, stares lifelessly into the fading light of his computer monitor. Laughter and admiration fill the hallways of the tiny space as theater goers filter away. The crew**

*has gone home, the lights have dimmed...*

*And when the lamb had opened  
The seventh seal-there was silence  
In Heaven about the space of half an hour.  
And the seven angels...with the seven trumpets...  
Prepared themselves to sound...*

*Barbara Waterman-Peters*

Widow with Mirror



Medium: pencil

Marty Nash

## Columbus Day

In the year 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue. What most people don't know, however, is that before the sailor gig, Chris was a blacksmith, a bartender, a dockhand, a grave-digger, and even a butcher (though only for one day due to the childlike nature of his conscience). On the day at hand, however, September 8th, 1485, Christopher Columbus was working for a short, greasy man by the name of Flavio Siffredi. He paid Chris two silver pieces an hour to be his bitch.

At least that's how Chris looked at his roofing job.

"Bitch-work," he mumbled, walking through the door and into the familiar aged smell that resembled sweaty feet dipped in Mayo. The tea table, a collaboration of flat stones and two warped planks, laughed at him, for the stones knew they were smarter than he, and the planks stronger. Directly behind the table, with its back to the wall, sat the elderly bench, mocking Chris and his lanky, undefined frame with its swaying back and sagging seat. The only attractive piece of furniture in the living room, a proud, sturdy oak chair given to him by his mother, well, it just plain snubbed him. The furniture, the uniform emptiness of the stone walls, the tiny, lonely bedroom at the far end of the slightly less tiny, lonely living room... they all seemed to say, "Welcome back, Chris, to the pathetic home of your pathetic existence."

"Bitch-work," he sighed again, collapsing into the accepting grasp of his straw bed. The delight that spread though his tortured muscles as he lay there rivaled that of a thunderous orgasm.

Saturdays at Siffredi Roofing always wore Chris out. The last day of the week was like the snap at the end of a good hanging. he had never worked six days a week. Five was hard enough.

"Who am I fooling?" he thought. "Maybe I should quit."

But then, just as he was about to further the argument for quitting, he heard the maniacal screams and wretched groans that could only mean one thing-a public lashing. He remembered today's lashing was to be given to a disobedient wife. This sliver of a real woman was to receive ten lashes for refusing her husband sex. (It's rumored that later that night this woman removed her husband's penis with the help of a glove and a sickle, but that's another story).

By the fifth or sixth lash, the screams, thankfully, had stopped, and all Chris could hear was the snap of the whip as it tore pieces of flesh from the disobedient wife's back.

And with the interruption, Chris's thoughts of quitting his job vanished. Maybe Attention Deficit Disorder caused the rapid loss of

thought that Chris had been the victim of so many times. More likely, though, the culprit behind these thefts lived in the smoke of the stupendous amounts of opium that Chris sucked down every day. After nine years of painting his lungs with gooey black resin, the level of his attention span had just about dipped below the level of a circus monkey. Though he knew he'd passed the burn-out marker long ago, he wanted to keep driving. He knew the consequences could be ugly, but how ugly, he'd forgotten. So he didn't care. Actually, he didn't care about much of anything. To Chris, a purpose was a sea mammal that resembled a dolphin. His convictions were about as clear as the sticky opium resin in the shaft of his favorite pipe.

As his eyelids fell victim to laziness, the remaining pops of the fireworks began to sound like the fireworks he'd heard had been sailed to Europe from China. Suddenly, he was launched into the air with the velocity of a lash-driven scream. The higher he rose, the more unfocused the world below him appeared. The pale blues and yellows above him brushed his skin and wrapped around him like feather boas. They hissed lullabies and talked dirty to him. He flew higher above the clouds, and the feelings that began as desire and lust changed to passion... a passion beyond the physical sense. Then the colors and feelings disappeared, and Chris was left suspended that could only be described as a euphoric gravy.

A voice, heartier than Ed McMahon's, and a hundred times more forceful than the loudest belch known to mankind rippled through the gravy, jarring Chris and his happy ass.

"Christopher!" the voice belched.

Frantically, Chris searched for the source of the voice, but he couldn't see far through the opaque gravy. The voice came again, this time with more hesitation.

"Christopher??"

Again, he couldn't locate where the voice came from.

"Dammit, Christopher, this isn't going to work if you don't answer me!"

"I'm here," he replied meekly.

"Thank you," the voice responded.

"Who are you?" Chris asked.

The voice bellowed again, "I am your god, Christopher!"

"THE god?"

"I am the god of the god of all gods!"

"I thought there was just one," Chris replied, puzzled.

"You are correct, sir," the voice boomed. "There is only one God, and that would be me... er, uh, that would be I... no, me..."

"You have been put on Earth for a reason, young Columbus," God declared.

Astonished, Chris spoke up. "Why?"

"Because there is something you love that you should share with others like you," God said.

Excited that he may have a purpose in life, Chris hurried to ask what that something was. A loud banging at his door, however, silenced the dream.

"Who is it?" he shouted, angry that he was unable to finish his conversation with God.

"Is this Christopher Columbus?" an anxious female voice yelled.

Chris's father had hired an entertainer from the Foxx One Theatre downtown to "take care" of Chris for a night.

"Jesus, kid," he'd said, "you haven't had a woman-friend in so long your balls must be the size of melons. It'll be good for you."

Chris had of course forgotten about his belated birthday present, and under usual circumstances would have told her to leave. After the dream though, he felt a need to talk to someone. Maybe this whore can help me find my calling, he thought as he opened the door.

"Thank you. My fucking legs are killing me," she said as she floated past Chris in a fog of perfume on her way to the bench.

Celeste's legs weren't alone in their pain. During the last week, she'd headlined in the staging of *Ass Destroyers II*. To add more misery to her murderous week, a string of anal beads had snapped in half inside of her during her last show, and she had to visit the medic to get the stragglers removed. The medic called it the strangest thing he'd ever seen, and Celeste almost called it the end of her theatrical career. She'd cried that entire night, knowing that she couldn't quit because other jobs paid not even a tenth of what she was earning. She'd be forced to live as a peasant again, scrubbing floors for turnips and onions.

The prostitution gig earned some extra gold pieces, and it didn't require the stamina of a marathon runner like the shows. The men who hired her didn't have the goods or the abilities her co-stars possessed.

"So what do you wanna do?" she asked. "Missionary, doggy-style, blow job... what's your preference? We got all night, baby."

Celeste knew from experience to get the men off early so they would fall asleep faster. She'd grown used to the dirty, aggressive persona, even though it was just an act.

Chris stood at the doorway, admiring Celeste's physical beauty. Her brown hair, somewhat darker than his own, fell around her oval face in waves as she ran her fingers through it. The batting of her eyelids resembled a butterfly's wings in flight. Her plump curves fit the definition of a woman of the 80's. Chris had seen the weight-gain programs that women flocked to in order to achieve that robust look. He knew Celeste came by her shape naturally, though. To call her magnificent would be an understatement.

"You want to smoke a bowl?" Chris asked, grabbing his pipe from the tea table.

"You'd rather get high than get laid?" she asked, astonished.

"I'm not too interested in sex right now," he said.

"That's a first for mankind."

"I just had this crazy dream," he said, puffing on the pipe. "I guess I'm just in a strange mood right now or something."

"Hey, I get paid just the same, so do whatcha like," she said, taking two massive hits from the pipe. "This is some quality shit, hun," she said between coughs. "You must have some good connections."

"Yeah, it comes from India. The best comes from India and China. It's expensive stuff, though. That's where most of my pay goes, I guess," he said.

"I would've guessed you spent it on this beautiful decor," she laughed. After a couple of seconds of confusion, Chris got the joke and laughed as well.

After smoking two bowls, they were stoned.

"Do you ever think your life has a purpose?" Chris asked her, as they lay side by side on the living room floor.

"Yes I do, and I know it's not to get men off, either." Celeste replied. "What's your purpose?"

Chris thought for a second. "I don't know. I'm not really good at anything, and I'm not really very smart."

"All you need is a passion, baby. You know what my passion is?"

"Blow jobs?" Chris guessed.

"No," she laughed. "It's acting. I know the shows at the Foxx don't seem to require much talent, but let me tell you, being reamed everyday by ten inch cocks and looking like you're loving it the whole time, now that takes acting. My dream is to someday act in a real play, though."

"I thought women didn't do that. It's just dudes, isn't it?" Chris asked.

"I'll be the first, then."

"You'd be famous for that, all right. I hope someday I find a passion. Something I like as much as you like acting," Chris said, nearly spraining his brain as he searched his heart for the answer to the question he didn't get to ask God in his dream.

"You will, baby," Celeste said, grabbing his hand. "What do you say, Chris, are you ready yet?"

"Let's smoke another bowl first," he replied, grabbing his pipe.

The sweet smell of the opium tickled his nostrils, and with each hit he climbed higher and higher, until finally the world below him came into focus.

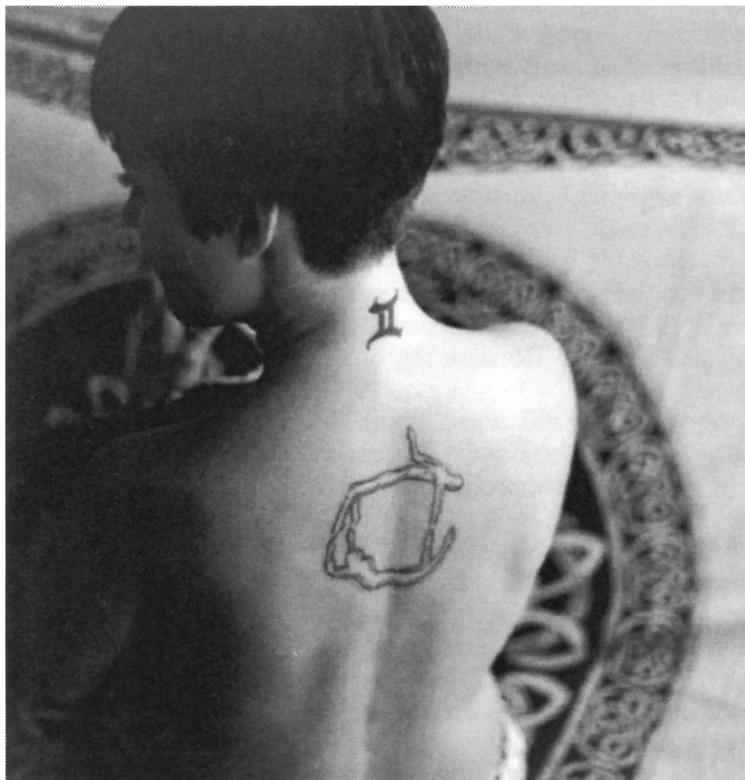
"Ah-ha," he said.

After the final tokes, Celeste's aching body fell into a much-needed sleep. The shrinking of the melons would have to wait.

Over the next few years, purpose became more than just an ocean mammal to Chris. With the help of a crew of his burnt-out friends and a con-artist that convinced the Spanish queen the journey would turn up a cheaper, faster trade route to India for spices (wink,wink) Christopher Columbus set sail.

Joseph Johnson  
Carrie

---



Medium: Photograph

Mark Mansfield

## Sailing to Bermuda

*Maroon you! We are not living in a boy's adventure story.*

--Joseph Conrad

Full Amenities, 5 Star Accommodations, all expenses paid, and the Winner's own personal choice of everything. God knows, though, nobody said a word about the overly dense cloud cover, the horizon, now AWOL, or the poorest visibility this side of bigotry,

not to mention the gradual appearance of our new little buddy, the giant albino tentacle undulating off *The Pandora*'s starboard bow, her sails billowing like ghosts, and all the while nary a white cap, the captain's compass frozen due Somewhere.

And Now Here's Pensacola's lost squadron, diving pilotless again from twelve o'clock, only to be swallowed up by more pea soup.

And obviously sent to strafe the already rearranged deck chairs. Yes, well, with the recent show of no hands,

nothing's starting to make perfect sense.

So please, enough hopping down and up, swearing more nonsense about two-way mirrors, while ever so nonchalantly slipping back over board, both legs at a time.

Oh sure, I could prattle something like point, game, match, and, yes, cigar, now as you splash around in overdrive, gasping, "Dutch, forget the Lifetime Grand Prize, the Many Wonderful Free

Gifts  
and Giveaways! Fuck Ed and Dick! Please, just throw me,"

I suppose "a line,"

to where a gurgling strand of bubbles now vanishes into the horizonless advance of harpoon- and trident-scarred writhings,  
the armada

of the sea's true shapes and forms.

*Amy England*

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Afterword: Two Arts

"Franz Kline, oil on cardboard." Black swirl, and the oil afterglow is pleasure. Before starting a painting he did many preparatory studies.

the making stroke caressive

Flicking a bit of white thread off a black shoulder.

Do you remember that hour we were waiting to climb the mountain? That park?

There was a boys' ping-pong team. Some had paddles, most did not, swinging practice strokes in time together empty handed.

Pretend to sign a name in air, a flourish, study the neon motion you have made.

Here's another picture of our trip. The team was running laps; an arrangement

occurred. I'd climbed a tree, looked down through a gap in the tufts of needles to the white path. Like tossed jacks, seven or eight heads of sleek, sealy black, elbows and feet showing and vanishing;

editive                    strike shut

Pleasure in this case preceded. I saw the photograph approach, snapped the shutter.

Like calligraphy, but also like a railway bridge seen from below against a white sky, as if that industrial ruin just happened, scrawled writing, pick-up-sticks.

"What's the character for *fude*?" I asked a woman on the train. With her finger, she traced the strokes on her palm. "Like so," she said, showing the palm to me.

Not a photograph: Your hand pulled my hand over your heart; we lay  
under the strong  
presence of stars. The galaxy was bearing down, a circular saw  
cutting dark metal with  
centrifugal fire:

editive              the making stroke

Light undoes what dark creates.  
We toiled up the night mountain,  
flew down the day.

Word nor ground. Not engraved or graven, grave (or heart dark under  
hand). The claim I  
have on you is in the playing language. Empty hands. Lightsome: Listen  
to what I'm going to say.

*Sarah Jane Johnson*


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He thought he'd painted an X on his forehead

*for Markus*

that evening we sat on the stoop,  
watched heat lightning vibrate among stars.  
The smoke from his cigarette spiraled around his face like curls.  
He'd left his father's home, my brother's, in the mountains of Virginia  
to live with me in the north woods, Aurora Borealis and snow.  
But it was midsummer's eve, the alfalfa fresh cut in the field,  
the big lake murmuring some watery myth about Ursus back to the  
velvet sky.  
Orion, he said, pointing to a cluster of pin points above, lies on his  
sword here.

At eighteen he conceded to the oddity of physical existence.  
Yes, we're all skin enclosed capsules of electrons and more.  
He'd figured out he was gay, maybe not an X, then, but the triangle,  
shaved his head, wore leather. He asked, but I didn't approve or not;  
who we fuck is based entirely upon what we're drawn to.

Ten years later we stare again into the dusky sky.  
He is sad and there is no way for me to help.  
He has left his last lover, a burly good ol' boy from Woolwine,  
when he discovered, four years late, that ol' boy fucked strangers  
in the rest stop up on US 80 outside of Blacksburg.  
Working a bar in Roanoke he buys Polish Vodka wholesale,  
by the case, pours the better part of a fifth into a Perrier bottle  
for the half hour trip home, the road carving a thin line  
through sheep-spotted meadows, his Honda rolling the red clay  
of Boone's Mill and Rocky Mount hard again and again.

I'd offer advice, but the tilt of his head discourages talk.  
The slash and burn of betrayal leap from a past life,  
before this family and farm fell in my senseless lap.  
I remember the reeling stumble of split union.  
Tonight, with shadows settling on the hills,  
flesh wraps our bones to silence, sweet Markus,  
and crickets, the white throated sparrow crying in the hemlock,  
our breath sighing to the soighing trees,  
all this noise created in moments under stars lull,  
and it's intimacy hung carefully around our necks that chokes us.

*Cactus May*

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## One of Those Bodies is Sitting Up

We're hiking up Negro Bill canyon near Moab one day and I start thinking about a story. It's not a story I'd heard before, at least not one I think I've heard, but you never can be sure. But this story just pops into my head. I know I made it up 'cause I've never heard it, and it's this whole story suddenly there. I love it when this happens, which has only been one other time since, but I'm always hoping.

July is there. She's got her light-duty hiking shoes, sports bra and Patagonia shorts on. She's leading at a good clip--wants to get her heart rate up and get a good work out. She's pushing Baxter her dog along the trail keeping him moving and Baxter's ecstatic because he loves coming along on our hikes when there's water. And there's plenty of water and we're crossing the creek every few minutes.

I'm in back and glad to be out of the truck and walking. There's supposed to be an arch a few miles in, Morning Glory arch. It sounds promising. And this story pops into my head. I wasn't asking, but Lord knows I'm always asking. I was just walking along observing the beautiful canyon walls. It wasn't totally complete yet, the story that is, but what story ever is?

This couple, Cotton and June, go backpacking up to this mountain pass they know about--Ute Pass. It's real far in and it takes all day to get there. When they finally get there, they're pretty exhausted and it's getting toward dark and they see someone's in their camp, and what's worse there's a storm rolling in which means rain--a lot of it, and they could see lightening too.

They're pretty bummed because the camp spot is the only stand of trees around on this high mountain pass, which is acres and acres of rolling grass. It's the only protection for at least a good mile. They knew it was a risk, but they thought it was early enough in the season that it was a good gamble nobody would be around. But there they were: a backpack and someone lying down.

And then a strange thing happened. The kind of thing that pimples your skin. A coyote runs out of the camp with what looks like a human arm in its jowl. And some Turkey Vultures move in.

"Did you see that?" he says.

"Sure did," she says, "it looked like an arm."

"That's what I thought," he says. "I think there might be something wrong," he says. "Let's go over and take a look."

They call out as they approach but no one answers, and then as they draw close the birds fly away and they see the bodies, four of them, two men, two women, in all states of contortion. Rigor mortis had set in and they looked horrific but they hadn't really begun to bloat from gasses, probably because the bodies were mostly frozen. Lightning strikes and cracks near by. The storm is moving in fast.

"Holy shit," he says.

"What'll we do?" she asks.

"Well," he says, "this is the only campsite. You set up the tent quick before it rains and I'll drag these bodies away."

"You're going to touch them," she says.

"Just their shoes," he says. "I'm going to drag them out of here for tonight, unless you don't mind them."

"No," she says, "move them but don't hurt them."

"They're dead," he says. "How can I hurt them?"

"For the police," she says, "they need the scene intact so they can figure it out."

"I will," he says. "I'll tell them that I had to move them because I didn't want to sleep with them."

"That's not funny," she says.

"Well, it's true," he says and hands her the tent from his pack.

"Okay," she says.

Cotton walks away muttering something under his breath and limping a little because his feet are sored up from hiking.

"Okay, okay, she says," he says, "okay. I'm the one who's moving all the dead people and she's saying okay. How about a thank you? No, Okay . . . Okay." And on like this

The first corpse he chooses to drag away is a woman, young maybe twenty or twenty-two. She has long blond hair that she puked something into and is dried and matted. Her blue eyes are bulging open and her mouth is wide and ajar. She wears a jacket shell and shorts. She has soiled herself pretty well. All the corpses have, and it makes the job vastly more unenjoyable.

But Cotton is determined to clear the campsite, and he does it. He moves all the corpses, first dragging them to the north but going south after rechecking the wind. Lightening is very close and popping-off on the eastern side of the pass, in the line of sight. The flash and clap are almost instantaneous as the last cadaver is laid out in the open about 100 yards south of the clump of trees.

The last body is a man dressed in Bouree tights and a nice water-proof shell. He has a beard and looks straight ahead like he'd faced his death head on. His glare is unnerving for Cotton, and he's glad to drop the legs and leave the bodies behind. A solid crack of thunder claps just above Cotton's head and he runs straight for the tent, which is by then set up, and he dives in as the rain comes washing down and there

is another nearby blast. He closes the flap behind him and counts his blessings.

"You've got to wash your hands," June says.

"I can't," he says. "It's raining and besides I just touched their shoes."

"I saw their pants," she says.

"Their pants but not their shoes," he says. "Their shoes were fine. They were already laying down when they did it," he says. "It didn't get in their shoes. There wasn't no shit on their shoes."

"When are you going to let me talk?" she says. "I'd like to tell you how I feel, please."

"Go ahead," he says.

"You've been touching people who are dead and being eaten by vultures and coyotes," June says. "Cotton, you need to wash your hands."

"But, June," he says, "the lightning."

"You need to wash your hands, Cotton," she says. "You're going to make me sick," she says.

He looks at her with frustration, and another bolt of lightning shakes the very earth the tent is on. A strike so close it might have hit one of their tent stakes.

"How about if I wait 'till the lightning passes," he says.

"Wash your hands," she says.

"How about if I stick them out and wash 'em outside the tent, in the rain," he says.

"Here's the soap," June says and throws it to him.

I'm afraid that now this is going to get complicated, but that was when July asked me why I was so quiet. I'd been silent a long time but we'd been cooped up pretty close for a while, so she let it go quite a spell, but now she was doing some asking.

"I got a story going on in my head," I say.

"Is it good?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "so far so good."

"Can you tell it to me?" she asks, as we cross over the creek for the umpteenth-dozen time.

"Sure," I say. And I tell her everything up to that point.

By then we're almost to the arch. We glimpse it from a high spot, then drop down one last time to wind along the creek bed. There is a gravelly hill up and then we're there. The arch is magnificent, more than I had even imagined. It spans a football field in a narrow--no more than the size of a car at times--span that is just chilling to see. There is a big shady alcove under it and five or six groups of people are sitting around talking or eating picnic stuff and enjoying the arch.

Voices echo pretty well but you can't really eavesdrop because by the time the sound reaches you it's tangled up with a bunch of other voices.

We find a nice shady spot on the bank of a spring that runs out of the wall, near the arch. I tell July the rest of the story while we eat cabbage, cheese, and horseradish wrapped in flour tortillas, and Baxter lays in the collected water of the spring and laps luxuriously at the surface.

Cotton rolls up his sleeves and thrusts them through the tent flaps and lets the rain wet them. It's hailing by then, little hail, but stingy pellets.

"It's fucking hailing," he says.

"Don't make me say it again," she says.

He draws his arms in and lathers them up well. He holds them out for her to see. June doesn't appreciate the gesture and motions towards the tent flap with her earthy eyes. He rinses them clean and then zips up the flap. His sleeping bag is getting wet so he readjusts for the wet spot and lays down. The rain probably won't let up till late, so they make a cold dinner in the tent and sip a little whiskey.

"Aren't you glad you washed your hands," June says.

"Actually," Cotton says, "I am."

They lay in their sleeping bags listening to the rain on the tent waiting for it to end its relentless drone. They find out pretty quick that it's spooky having four dead bodies so close. The lightning alone would be frightening enough for anyone, but add dead people to that and you're talking nightmare caliber stuff.

June hears noise outside and in the direction of the bodies, but she tells herself it's just animals working on the bodies. Cotton lays awake thinking of the bodies, too, only his pictures in his mind are a little sharper on account of he'd been the one handling the bodies. He wonders if they should be worried about attracting bears, and decides it's raining too hard to do anything about it. So he lays there.

They begin to speculate on the deaths. They lay in the dark and outline all the possible horrific ways the bodies could have come to their end. Most of the stories implicate that they, too, are now in a great deal of danger, but they don't do anything about it.

"What do you think got 'em?" June asks.

"They got bit or stung or something," Cotton says. "Or poisoned, because, you saw, how they were all contorted," he says, "like they were screaming or something, at least in agony."

"Don't think it was an animal," she says.

"Naw," he says, "they all got their heads."

June slowly formulates her theory that they'd been murdered by a small caliber handgun, even though there'd been no evidence of gun-

fire.

"June, honey," he says, "there were no wounds."

"You might not have seen," she says.

"Believe me," he says, "I'd have seen if there was a bullet. A whole section of shoulder would be blown away, or teeth would be in the back of the head."

"God," she says, "do you have to be so graphic?" she says, "you know I see everything clearly that you say."

"That's because I'm a poet," he says.

"Ya, I don't care what you are," she says, "just lay off the graphic descriptions and bullet wounds."

"But there are none," he says.

"Ya," she says recollecting her makeshift pillow under her head, "time will tell."

There is nothing but the sound of rain for a long time after that. Cotton thinks June has fallen asleep and he himself is close to drifting off when June speaks again.

"How long you think they've been dead?"

"What," Cotton says, jerked off the edge of a dream.

"The people. How long do you think they were dead?" June says.

"Couple of days, I'd guess," he says, "but I'm no expert. I haven't seen too many," he says, "I can't remember even four before today and now I've drug four dead people out of our campsite so we could put up the tent," he says. "It's a strange fucking world. What'll be next?"

"I don't know," June says, "if I can do it. I mean there're all laying out there in the rain and animals are eating on them," she says, "something isn't right about it."

"I know, June," he says, "I feel a little weird about it myself. I mean shit, I've seen so many horror movies that my imagination is going crazy."

"I want to go back," June says. "I'm not going to be able to sleep."

"Honey, it's not safe," he says and raises himself up on one elbow.

"I know it," she says, "but as soon as the rain lets up, I want to get out of here."

"Okay," he says, "I'll go with you, but would you mind if I slept until the rain lets up," he says. "Could you just wake me when you're ready?"

She turns her head toward him on her makeshift pillow and looks for his eyes in the dark. There were none she could see. "You can sleep?" she asks.

"Sure," he says, "I've washed my hands of it," he says.

"I'll wake you up," she says.

July is listening patiently but I can tell there's something she wants to say, so I decide to give her the way in.

"What do you think so far?" I ask.

"It's good," she says and looks down at her knees.

"What do you really think?" I ask.

"Why do there have to be dead people?" she asks.

"Because," I say, "it's a story about some dead people."

"Why don't you tell a story about some live people?" she asks.

"There are live people," I say.

"Half as many living as dead," she says. "Why does it always have to be about death?"

"Honey," I say, "I'm just dictating the story the way it came to me."

She's quiet after that. I mean, who could argue with inspiration. It's like a wave, if you're lucky enough to catch it you got to ride it out. She's an artist she knows this. But she's not done yet.

"I don't think June is dumb enough to want to walk off in the dark and the rain just to get away from the bodies," July says. "And what is she going to do with the tent?"

"What if the bodies were twitching," I say, "as rigor mortis sets in? or if they were starting to smell?" I ask.

"I don't know, I guess," she says. "But why do they have to leave?"

A light turns on and I suddenly realize the problem. "But, oh, you didn't let me get to that."

"They don't leave?" she says.

"Can I tell the story?" I ask.

"Okay," she says, "but let's walk back too."

"If you don't want to hear it," I say, "I'll keep it to myself."

"No," she says, "you've got to finish it now or those poor people will be camping with those cadavers the rest of my life."

"You can walk in front," I say, "if you want, and I'll try and give you some closure, but this is the part I'm a little uncertain about," I say.

Cotton wakes up as the sun is starting to hit the tent, birds are calling from tree to tree outside. Camp Robbers, he thinks, then remembers the bodies and sits up. June is dead asleep beside him, all wrapped up in her bag and looking beautiful. He unzips the tent and climbs out barefoot and in long john underwear and stretches. The sun is out and the grassy open pass is steamy as the solar energy lifts the moisture from the deep green leaves. Birds are flying around in a general havoc. Cotton can see the bodies laid out not far away. One of the bodies had sat up in the night, wracked with a spasm. Now, it

was sitting stiff-backed above the others and looking off to one side.

“Cotton?” June says.

“Right here,” he says.

“I must have fallen asleep,” she says.

“Slept hard. I was exhausted.”

“Me too,” June says.

June climbs out of the tent in a fleece top and bottomless. She walks over barefoot a few feet to the north and squats to take a pee.

“Cotton,” she says. “One of those bodies is sitting up”

“I know,” he says.

“You didn’t do that, I hope,” she says.

“No, it was a spasm or something.”

“I swear I heard those bodies popping and croaking all last night,” she says and stands up and shakes her butt to get the last drip off.

By now, Cotton has looked around a bit and stands at the fireplace. Everything is soaked with water. He finds a dirty plastic bag. He hesitates to pick it up. It’s full of a white crystalline substance. He thinks it’s drugs but tastes it and it’s only salt.

July stops short in her tracks and turns around. Ahead on the trail Baxter steps into the creek and lays down. July is wearing her purple lens glasses and they catch the sun and the light hits my eyes.

“You’re not going to have Cotton licking things he finds in plastic bags like some kind of Brooklyn super-cop. That’s bullshit,” she says.

“Alright,” I say. “I’ll cut that.”

“Good,” she says. “You know,” she says, “it’s good you listen to me. . . a writer needs a good editor.”

“Ya, thanks,” I say.

Cotton looks around the campsite in the copper light of morning. There are backpacks and sleeping bags piled randomly and soaked in water. The gear is pretty nice and not brand new. It seemed like these people were experienced hikers.

In the center of the fire is a flat rock and resting on it is a pot filled with rain water and a few floating mushrooms. In the wet, dark ashes of the fire a lot more mushrooms are littered around where they apparently flowed out of the pot as it filled with rain. Cotton looks closer and sees mushrooms in the food bowls near the rocks set up around the fire for sitting on.

“June,” he says. “I think they made a bad call on dinner.”

“Why’s that,” June says. She was beside him and looking at the evidence, too.

She thinks he’s right, or knows he’s right. June knows quite a bit

about mushrooms, and she herself often picked them for dinners when they were camping. She skewers a mushroom with a fir stick and brings it up to examine. It is a poisonous variety of mushroom. She is certain, and unfortunately for the hikers, a type that resembles another mushroom that is a delicacy and a favorite of hers.

"You're right," she says. "They fucked up."

"It's too bad," he says, "they were probably real nice people."

"Just like us," she says, "only they don't know their mushrooms as well."

June pauses and then as if coming out of a trance says, "We gotta get down and let someone know. I know somebody is worrying over this. Their families need to know."

"Sounds good to me," Cotton says. "I'm all for moving."

They drop the tent and roll it up and stuff their sleeping bags into the stuff-bags and put on fresh socks, put on boots and sun screen because the clouds had moved on and the treeline sun is brutal. They get their packs together and heft them onto their shoulders; they start walking off together without a word. After a few seconds of walking, Cotton stops and turns around to look at the camp to see if he'd left anything. He'd acquired this habit early in life and it had since saved him leaving thousands of things behind.

The camp is as they'd found it. They had decided to do this so the authorities would get a better picture of the original scene. They left rocks on the sleeping bags so they wouldn't blow away, but everything was as it was except--

"June, we got to put those bodies back," he says.

June stops and looks back. Her face wrinkles as she thinks how unpleasant this would be. "You think so?" she says.

"Yes," he says. "We should have taken pictures," he says, "they we could have left them and just told them why we moved them, but the authorities are going to want to see the bodies where they expired."

They stand there looking at the bodies in the grass, one sitting in frozen motion over the other three, the others with legs bent at elegant angles and backs arched. For a second Cotton thinks the bodies are engaged in some ecstatic dance. He thinks he could write a poem about this. June walks up to him and grabs his hand and holds it softly in her own.

"Cotton," she says, "fuck it."

"Really?" he asks.

"Ya, really," she says, "fuck it. They're dead."

"I wouldn't want them to move me a second time," Cotton says. "I'd want them to leave us be, for their sakes. I mean, once you're dead, you're dead, no use in making the living folks drag you around any more than they have to."

"Ya," she says, "fuck it."

She tugs his hand gently and he turns to walk with her. They hold hands and start across the grassy expanse to the edge of the fir and spruce stands below. The sky is blue; the grass is green and yellow; the dirt is a vibrant red. There is a small breeze that smells of the trees below. They only have to walk out of sight of the camp to put the night out of their heads.

"Cotton," says June who gives a little squeeze to his hand. "It's good to be alive."

"The end," I say.

"It's good to be alive?" she says. "That's it?"

"I guess so," I say. "It seems like a good place to me."

We're still far up the trail from where we parked the truck. An older couple pass us going up. We stand on the side of the trail so they can move past. The woman is gray and slight and dressed in khaki shorts and a chambray shirt. She wears a broad-rimmed hat and large-lens glasses. She smiles pleasantly and moves along. The man is tall and has leathery skin. He walks with a stick and stops when he's next to me.

"Here," says the man, "have an edible mushroom."

He hands me a small Puffball mushroom and before I know it, it's in my hand. I recoil a little at this. It's amazing how strange things like this happen to me. July laughs when she sees my reaction.

"It's edible," says the man. "A puffball. We found a bunch down the trail a ways," he says. "It's good eating. Just slice it like steak and grill it up."

"Thanks," I say.

The older man smiles at me and moves on.

"Thanks," says July as the man passes her.

"My pleasure," he says.

I stand there with the fleshy mushroom in my hand for a second, then I regain my composure. "I'm going to put this in my pack," I say.

"That was darn nice of him," July says.

"Yes, and a bit peculiar, too," I say.

I suggest to July that we rest a second in the shade. It's pretty warm and she agrees. I figure she wants to tell me about the story. She always has a comment and I want to make it easier for her, since I enjoy hearing what she has to say

"What do you think of the story?" I ask.

"It's good," she says.

"What do you really think?" I ask.

"I think you need to work on your endings," she says, "that's all."

"How would you make the ending better?" I ask.

"I don't know, it just doesn't seem finished," she says. "It peters out."

"Peters out," I say.

"Peters out," she says.

I think about this a while and another couple of people pass. I refill my water bottle from a larger one in my pack. I pour some in July's bottle too.

"What if I have Cotton take the money out of their wallets?" I ask.

"No way, unbelievable," she says, "you already told us they shit all over themselves."

"I could take that out."

"No, I like the shit, and besides," she says, "it wouldn't help. It's too petty. I mean how much cash do you take backpacking?"

"Okay," I say. "I have an alternative ending. The authorities show up the next morning tipped off by a worried parent, and Cotton and June have to explain it all to the rescue patrol."

"Boring," she says.

"Okay," I say, "then try this: Cotton props the bodies up to photograph them. This would make sense because of his vision of them dancing, and he wants to really capture the image, but as he's doing it the authorities run up on him and they throw him down and beat him for being so fucking sick."

"Stupid," she says.

"Well," I say, "I don't know. I like the story. Maybe people will just have to get used to my endings just fizzling out. Maybe my readers will come to love me for them," I say.

"Maybe," she says, "you need to leave the dead people out and let Cotton and June go for a hike and see how beautiful everything is around them and not dead."

"Maybe you're right," I say. "Maybe they're swinger backpackers and they meet their pagan friends up there for a big orgy, only someone gets jealous and can't go through with it but it's too late, their lover is already doing the nasty."

"Jealousy, death," she says, "how about something positive," she says.

"I can't think about being positive," I say, "I'm a writer."

"Think about your reader," she says. "They're going to cut their wrists if they get too much of this."

"I'm just taking dictation," I say. "It's my muse. I take what she gives me."

"Well, you oughtta get her out of all that black and leather and have her put on a sun dress once in a while, or get a new muse."

"I just take what is handed to me," I say, "no matter the muse."

"Well, someone ought to hand you a good spanking," she says,

"for writing gloom and doom."

"Alright," I say. "I'll try." And I get up and brush the sand off my butt. "You ready to go on?"

"Sure," she says. "I mean I like the other stuff. Your storytelling is getting really good."

"Thanks," I say. "I appreciate you being honest with me."

"Oh, you know me," she says, "I'll always tell you what I think."

"Well, I think you're beautiful," I say.

"Ya?" she says, "I think you're beautiful, too."

"I really am glad to be alive," I say.

"You just have a round-about way of saying it," she says.

"You know me well," I say. We walk on a ways before anything else is said, then I say, "I like when you tell me stories, too. Would you make one up for me sometime?"

"Sure," she says, "where does it happen?"

"Somewhere happy," I say. "How about at Morning Glory arch?"

"No problem," she says. "No problem-o."

*Jodie Clawson*

Untitled



Medium: Oil on Canvas

Jennifer Johnson

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*Wunden der Erinnerung*

Hans Peter's father fought in the War for Hitler—  
 He offers this bit of his past to me uncertainly,  
 As though not sure himself  
 Why he has chosen to remember.  
 He hears my silence then, and turns his face,  
 Cheeks a strange, feverish-red,  
 To the window and empty street beyond.  
 I stare at the back of his head,  
 Where the fine brown hair has already begun to thin,  
 And wonder what kind of response he expects.  
 I can't see his face, but I know  
 The blankness of his pale, glass-blue eyes,  
 The expression of absence, that tells me,  
 Whatever he is thinking of, it is not this moment,  
 Not this place.

*I was born in Günzburg* he says  
*Do you know what that is?*  
*The little village that is the Mengele family.*  
 And Günzburg's most famous son, Josef,  
 Todesengel—the *Angel of Death*—dancing  
 For his people at the gates of Auschwitz.

Hans Peter attempts a smile, silent,  
 His lips pressed tight together,  
 And then he raises his hand,  
 Touching an image on glass of a figure,  
 A man passing by on the darkened street.

\* 'Wunden der Erinnerung' literally means 'the wounds of memory.'

Jenny Lagergren

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### Bar Season

T.V. commercials are comfort  
between rounds of laughter.  
Hours crack in a glass,  
customers toast a fair  
evening and submit hope  
to melted ice. I hear  
*Wheel of Fortune* and wipe  
a lousy guess from my mouth.  
The puzzle is Biological Clock,  
not Sociological, a scene  
at my bar playing out  
time's fake fillers.

I watch stools of  
fading faces. Familiar  
laughs cough crisp bills  
from deep pockets. I've  
sold my time to rumpled  
napkins, discolored spit spots  
wiped up. I've stared at  
drinks and bottles long,  
held splintered actions deep  
within dark lines  
below my eyes.

The bar closes. Outside  
fireflies that once lit  
a hip night sky have turned  
into raindrops, regular and  
long to beat out the end  
of the day. I walk  
through them and disappear,  
passing the bottle into night.

Sarah Jane Johnson

A&P Epiphany

*for June Deering*

After your husband dropped dead  
of a heart attack at thirty-five  
in front of Ely's Grocery  
in downtown Beulah leaving you  
with three little kids and no life insurance,  
after you had found part time work  
in the county social services office  
ministering to others' misfortunes,  
you saw Jesus in the A&P  
walking up the clear blue tile  
of the canned goods aisle.

He told you life would be all right  
and you believed him because you believed,  
and He was right, living wasn't the worst,  
but enduring. He didn't mention the empty side  
of the bed, a familiar expression on your son's face,  
the late night coffee as you watched  
the trucks roll by on U.S. 31,  
no hand on your shoulder.

We all need salvation in our lives,  
a hole in the clouds to walk through,  
water turning to wine. And sometimes,  
like now, on this early June morning,  
when the sky stretches blue and the lake  
at the end of the street is flat and shining,  
think how nice, how nice it would be  
to find fishes and loaves on the kitchen counter,  
to know you don't have to walk on water.

## *Contributors*

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**Kathryn Bernard Bloomquist** is a non-traditional student at Kansas State University majoring in English with a minor in Philosophy. She sees her studies as a means of furthering a literary and artistic expression of the depth of spiritual life. **Kris Christensen** is studying poetry and creative nonfiction at Eastern Washington University where she is Poetry Editor for *Willow Springs*. Her work has recently appeared in *The Portland Review Literary Journal* and *Pontoon: An Anthology of Washington State Poets*. **Jodie Clawson** will be receiving a B.F.A. degree with an emphasis in Painting and a secondary degree in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences. Both degrees will be completed this May. **Amy England** is in the Ph.D. program in creative writing at the University of Denver. Her work has appeared or will appear in *TriQuarterly*, *Ohio Review*, *Sonora Review*, *Germ*, and *New American Writing*, among others. She is an associate editor of the *Denver Quarterly* and a book reviewer for the *Rocky Mountain News*. **Brad Garmon** is a first-year graduate student in English at KSU, following undergraduate study in Earth Science, English, and Geospatial Analysis, and a year working in publishing. While concentrating on fiction and creative nonfiction at KSU, he has been awarded Hickok and Popkins Fellowships, and an AWP Journals Project nomination. Garmon is the recipient of this year's *Touchstone* Graduate Nonfiction Award. **Thomas Gribble** was a winner of the Associated Writing Programs' Intro Journals Project for 1998, poetry. His work was selected as a finalist in both the 1997 Floating Bridge Chapbook Contest and the 1998 Palanquin Press Chapbook Contest, and has also appeared in *Hawaii Review*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Crab Creek Review* and others. Gribble was this year's recipient of the *Touchstone* Graduate Poetry Award. **Jared Janovec** is a candidate for a B.F.A. degree in May 1999 with a concentration in Ceramics. Various biological phenomenon are currently the conceptual basis of his work. Jared will be pursuing a graduate degree in Ceramics as of Fall 1999. **Jennifer Johnson** will be graduating in May with a B.A. in English (literature and creative writing) and Anthropology, and a minor in German. She plans to take the next year off from school, and then apply for graduate programs, either in English or Anthropology. Her poem, "Wunden der Erinnerung" is a co-recipient of this year's *Touchstone* Undergraduate Poetry Award. **Joseph Johnson** is a Sophomore majoring in Fine Arts at Kansas State University. Placing photographs within a human context, his ambition is to make photographs that engage the viewer in some way. **Sarah Jane Johnson** is a graduate student at Colorado State University. **Jenny Lagergren** is currently working on her B.A. in English Literature, and will graduate in December 1999. She was a co-recipient of this year's *Touchstone* Undergraduate Poetry Award for her poem, "A Walk on Rock." **Karen Lavery** is a nontraditional student at Wichita State University where she is finishing a B.A. degree with Creative Writing and Psychology majors and a Women's Studies minor. **Mark Mansfield** is a second-year poetry student at

Johns Hopkins University's Part-Time Graduate Writing Program. He also works as a publications specialist for a law firm in Washington, D.C., and performs locally as a rock musician. **Cactus May** is an M.F.A. poetry candidate at Colorado State University. He was an artist-in-residence at Rocky Mountain National Park in the Summer of 1996. His poetry and fiction has appeared in *Dry Creek Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, the *Thrifty Nickel*, *Nieve Roja*, and *Greyrock*. **Marty Nash** is a senior in English at KSU, and is this year's recipient of the *Touchstone* undergraduate award for fiction, "Columbus Day," and nonfiction, "My Heroes Have Always Been Carpenters." **Iris Gribble-Neal** is a graduate student and teaching assistant at Eastern Washington University, accepted into the Masters of English program with a Fellowship. She is co-editor for the journal *Heliotrope*, whose work has been published by the following: *Floating Bridge Press*, *Plainsongs*, *Cape Rock*, *Owen Wister Review*, and others. **Michael John O'Donnell** is finishing up his M.F.A degree in fiction at San Diego State University. He is currently at work on a historical novel that takes place in Shanghai prior to the outbreak of WWII. O'Donnell is this year's recipient of the *Touchstone* Graduate Fiction Award. **Darlene Pagán** is a Chicago native who is currently writing her dissertation with the University of Texas at Dallas where she teaches Literary Analysis. Most recent publications include *The Louisville Review*, *Evansville Review*, *Borderlands*. Her current chapbook, *Sins Against the Body*, is currently under consideration. **Jessica Shaw** is a Sophomore in Fine Arts at Kansas State University. **Barbara Waterman-Peters** received her Master of Fine Arts degree from KSU in 1998. Currently, she is teaching painting at Washburn University. She has shown her work nationally and internationally, and it is included in numerous corporate, public, and private collections. **Steve Werkmeister** is currently enrolled in the M.A. program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he is a Research Assistant. The focus of his studies is Renaissance Literature.



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Kris Emmons is a Senior pursuing a B.F.A. in Art at Kansas State University, U.S.

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Watterson. He hopes to one day work as an animator for Disney and perhaps write his own comic strip. His painting, *Defamation of an American Icon*, has been chosen as this year's *Touchstone* cover art.

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