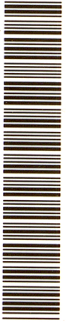


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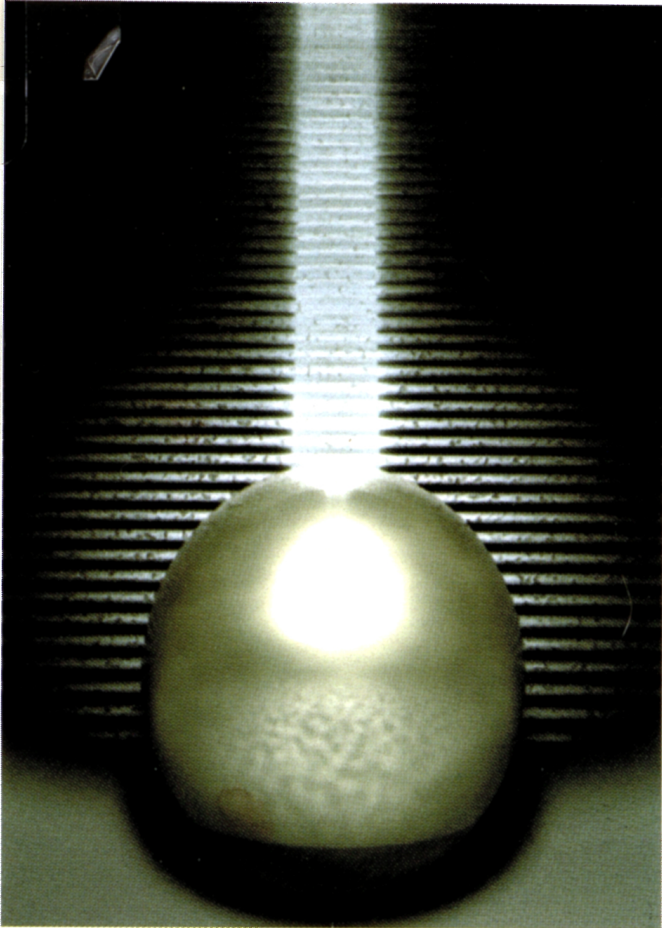
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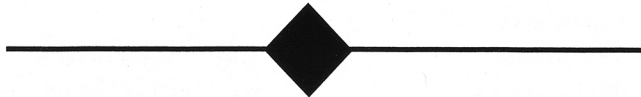
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Kansas State University

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Editor's Note

The American Heritage Dictionary provides two definitions of the word “touchstone.”

touch•stone: 1. A hard black stone, such as jasper or basalt, formerly used to test the quality of gold or silver by comparing the streak left on the stone by one of these metals with that of a standard alloy. 2. An excellent quality or example used to test the excellence or genuineness of others.

When I came to Kansas State, I wasn't sure what I was getting myself into. I have found it to be one of the best-kept secrets in the country. I wish to thank the faculty and staff (especially Steve Heller and Sara Wege) for their consistent support. As we finish *Touchstone* for another year (our 34th), I hope that its readers will find it a secret discovered. This volume continues our tradition of being a graduate student journal that invites submissions from creative writing programs all over the country. And we got them. From Alaska to West Virginia, the submissions came and filled my mailbox with many wonderful surprises. There were more good submissions than we had room for, and my staff agonized, argued, and wrestled (literally) over every decision. I hope that you find this discovery a touchstone of writing produced at contributing institutions. Certainly, the writers represented in this volume, and the fine students at Kansas State have worked hard to make it so. Thank you, dear reader, for taking the time to open this. It is our book, and as Ben Jonson said in his epigram, *To the Reader*:
“Pray thee take care, that tak'st my book in hand,
To read it well; that is, to understand.”

—1616

*Amanda Latrenta*Toni Salamoni's Pool Party

i don't know why
you wouldn't let me bring my bathing suit
to Toni Salamoni's pool party
everyone else's slick bodies diving into the chlorine
said it was too early in the summer for swimming
and plus those chemicals would burn my scalp
damage my brain and what if it's too deep
and what if there's something lurking in there

like some big shark or sting ray
was resting at the bottom of Toni Salamoni's
above-ground pool
waiting to bite off my fleshy little toes

all the other girls are in the pool
they are shiny and their hair is so blonde
there is yellow on the water
standing outside the glass door
the sun pulls a shadow from me
and blurs it on the ground
i want to be under that quiet
that deep blue silence underwater
you were always like this
afraid i would drown
or worse
afraid the cool over my skin would change me

Amanda Latrenta

Howard Dates Ate Elmer's Glue

in the 5th grade sucked it from the orange nozzle
let it dribble like marshmallow into his mouth
that's what I pretended it was to keep me from throwing up
Ms. Zoccolii never noticed was busy at her desk
cutting bird shapes out of blue paper
birds with no eyes
and sad wings feathers that would never be attached
I imagined how the glue must stick his organs together
a clump of a heart stuck to a lung stuck to a liver stuck to a
stomach
and when he would look up at me
a plastic bottle half empty
in his dark hands desperate to gross me out
I would imagine
his hands glued to his ears his beatless wing
a bird claw in his eye

Samantha Warren

Amazons

“So you’re really going to do it, Lex? Geez, I just can’t believe it! I mean, you’ve done some crazy shit before, no joke, like the time you and Katie flashed the football team from the Winstead’s drive-thru, and then took off in your car? *That* was some crazy shit. God, you should have seen the look on Colin Goodman’s face, Lex, *priceless*, but shit, Lex, this is big-time. Man, your mom is gonna kill you for sure...”

I rolled my window down, blowing my cigarette smoke out as gently as I possibly could, looking cool and collected as I flicked my ash outside. I ran my hand through my black hair, which was much shorter than most other girls’ that I knew and much spikier, thanks to a generous amount of gel. I let Sarah’s incessant babbling drift out the window with my smoke. Waited for the light to change so I could show this brand-new Cavalier with the too-large muffler next to me who was boss. I tapped the gas pedal of my ’93 Laser.

Anyone who knows me knows my car. Not very many people drive a burgundy car with gold wheels and trim. I normally wouldn’t either, but when you’re a high school student, you can’t afford to look a gift horse in the mouth, so to speak, and really, it’s a pretty decent car. A little, well, flashy, to say the least. People who know me say it fits me perfectly. Even though I don’t consider myself “flashy,” just alternatively fashion-oriented.

Light flashes green, and we were off. Sarah was still yapping about what balls I had and how my mom was going to have my ass over this particular little stunt I was about to pull. Sometimes, she’s like this giant mouth, attached to a mass of curly brown hair, oversized brown eyes, some skin and a backpack, I shit you not. As if I cared what my mom thinks. Chris was lounged across

the backseat of my car, picking at the fringe on his ripped jeans. Man of few words, he looked up and caught my eye in the rearview mirror.

“Can we change the music? This old shit makes my ears hurt!” he cried plaintively.

I glared back at my sixteen year old little brother. He knew the rules: my car, my music. And I liked to listen to classical music when I drove. Today, Chopin’s piano was resonating through my car.

Love for classical music was something I inherited from my father. He was a high school music teacher. As a matter of fact, music was one of the only things I got from him before he left Mom for one of his students, which is a lot more than my little brother received from him. Chris didn’t even get a chance to know the guy. I can’t say I’ve been real bothered about it. Lots of people’s dads take off when they’re little. No big deal, right?

I’m not exactly sure why, but listening to classical music always soothes me. And I figured if I was going to be behind the wheel with a blabbermouth and a crybaby, with my, um, *volatile*, personality, I’d need all the soothing I could get.

It was a wonder Chris could even hear the music over Sarah’s chatter, and it’s not like I *wanted* to bring him along or anything, not my fault mom made me give him a ride to and from school every day. He caught my look in the mirror and decided instead of pushing it with me, he would resign himself instead to silent pissyness.

We were en route to Michelangelo’s Body Art tattoo and piercing shop. I had turned eighteen over the weekend and felt the need to do something really cool to my body. I already had a tattoo, thanks to an ex-boyfriend who figured girls that you date don’t need to conform to age restrictions. My shoulder had been graced with the Japanese symbol for faith since I was sixteen.

People ask me all the time, “What’s it mean?” Like it’s any of their business what I decide to fucking emblazon on my body, really. Then I tell them that it stands for faith, and they start looking at me all misty-eyed and shit, and I have to walk away before I get really pissed off.

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I don't understand why I have such a low tolerance for everyone around me. I like most people okay; I just wish that they would occasionally think about something other than themselves for once before they open their fucking trap. At the same time, although I really think she's a great person inside, at times I get so irritated with Sarah, because she always has her nose in other people's business.

By the time I had turned eighteen, I hadn't exactly matured the way my mom would have liked. I loved her enough to at least try to be the girl she wanted for a daughter when she was around, but my leading a double life was not easy on either of us.

I had gotten into the habit of changing clothes when I walked in the door of my house. I changed my tone of voice, how I spoke, how I acted, everything. I hated it when my mom gave me one of her "disappointed" looks. I know it sounds really stupid, but I really did want her to be proud of me. And to know that for all the trouble I got into and all the stupid shit I pulled, I really was a good person.

However, as I said before, turning eighteen didn't slow me down much. Now we were on our way to the best tattoo and body-piercing parlor in town. I had decided I needed a body piercing. Not my ears; earrings had no personality whatsoever. Plus, I have really cute earlobes. Facial piercing was definitely out, as my mom would flip shits the moment I walked in the door. For an art teacher, she was awfully closed-minded about body art. No, I needed something relatively hidden.

I considered navel rings, but found out in gym class one day that too many cheerleaders had them 'cause they were just so cute! I was so horrified that I ruled my navel right out. No, I needed a piercing that was a credit to my boundless tolerance of pain. Something that not everyone could see and bug me about, like my tattoo, but something that if the right people knew about it they would say, "Geez, Lex. That is so cool. I could never have done something like that."

Which is how I came to the conclusion that I would get my breasts pierced. Most people call this nipple piercing, but there is something about the word that just makes me shudder. So for me, it's breast piercing.

Now, this is where most people start freaking out. But I assure them that I'm sure it won't be as bad as it sounds, and that it is the logical conclusion to a well-thought-out problem. Besides, I'm going to do it anyway and if they don't like it, tough shit.

We pulled into the parking lot and piled out of the car. I led the way inside, saying "hey" to the guy behind the counter, who was nonchalantly fiddling with a quarter-inch-wide hole in his ear while he thumbed through the newspaper.

"What can I do for ya?" he said, sizing me up. I could see him taking me in: the black Doc Martens boots that laced up to my knees, the ripped fishnet hose. My baby-blue T-shirt that proclaimed "I'm Not Wearing Any Underwear" in navy blue cursive across my chest. I was wearing my black leather wrist cuffs that had the same silver studs as my belt, which was holding up my plaid skirt held together by safety pins.

"Yeah," I said, forcing him to look up and make contact with my deep brown eyes. "I need to see about getting my breasts pierced."

That was all I needed to say to send the eyes southward again. Boys, sometimes. Do they ever think of anything else? I mean, I could practically see the hamster turning the wheel in his head; it was that sad.

"Okay. You eighteen? Good. Forty-five each. I need your driver's license and you need to sign these papers," he reeled off, passing me a clipboard. "I can do it in about fifteen minutes, gotta wait for the equipment to be cleaned. Pay first." He scratched his much-decorated arm and glanced over my shoulder. "What's with them?"

I turned to see what the others were doing. Chris was flipping through a book of Polaroids of previous customers marked "Below the Waist." Sarah was staring in shock at a collection of naked lesbian tattoo designs on the wall.

I pushed five twenties still crisp from the ATM machine across the glass case toward him, along with my driver's license, hoping ten bucks would be enough of a tip so that he wouldn't maim me any more than I was asking him to. I shrugged in response to his question, "Repressed?"

He chuckled. "Have a seat. I'll come get you when I'm ready." He picked up the paperwork I had finished and went to a back room hidden by a curtain.

I turned instead to the glass cases of body jewelry, pretending not to hear Chris muttering, "They really do look like O'Keefe paintings..."

I walked along the case, eyeing the various rings, wondering what mine would look like. There were all kinds of rings, varying in colors and sizes; there were even teal green rings, my mom's favorite color. I had to smile at the thought of my mother in a place like this. She wouldn't last two minutes, and what was worse, she would start asking questions in that stupid way of hers. I could just hear her, "Yes, but *why* would you do a thing like that? It looks so *weird!* Did it hurt? Well, why would you do it if it hurt?"

Utterly hopeless.

My mother doesn't understand anything outside her little world of teaching art at the local grade school, housekeeping, and grocery shopping. Really, by now she was at home, trying to figure out what I had done to earn the detention that was inevitably keeping me and Chris late this time. That's how reliable she was. Shoot me if I ever get that reliable.

Don't get me wrong—it's not that I don't like my mom, I do. I just wish I could open her mind a little to the world outside so she wouldn't seem like such an ignorant person sometimes. Then maybe she could see me as the type of person I really was, strong and independent.

I sighed and walked over to the couch and sat down. Sarah immediately came over and plopped down beside me. She looked at me intently, trying to figure out what was going on in my head.

"You scared?"

“Not really.”

“Your mom is really going to kill you when she finds out. You know that, don’t you?”

“That’s *if* and not *when*. My mom doesn’t make a habit of checking me out naked for your information, so it’s very doubtful that she ever will. And who died and made you the voice of responsibility all of a sudden?”

“I just know you, that’s all. Ten bucks says, right now you’re thinking about what she’s going to think. And I can almost guarantee it will be worse than when she almost sent you to rehab for finding your stash of pot in your drawer. Or the time when she took your car away for a week after she found out about you ditching algebra. Or the time when she caught you sneaking back into the apartment at three in the morning...”

God, I wish Sarah would keep her fucking trap shut sometimes.

“You remember how bad she flipped shits when you came home with the tattoo? You were grounded for, like, *ever*. Think of how bad it will be when you come home with this.”

“Sarah, zip it. Jesus, it’s not like *you’re* doing it and having to go home to my mom or anything. Why don’t you just let me take care of myself?”

“Your funeral, Miss Bad-Ass,” she sniffed, and got up to go join Chris, who was still poking through “Below the Waist.”

I swear, if she weren’t my best friend, she would drive me up the wall. Just what I needed. Another fucking mother. She did pretty much have me pegged, though. Not that I’d ever give her the satisfaction of knowing it.

Piercing-guy emerged from the back room at that point, breaking my thoughts. He grinned at me.

“Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.” I threw Sarah and Chris a defiant look and strode toward the back room. Sarah followed.

“You can’t be in here,” piercing-guy said to her.

“Why not? I have to be! That’s what I came for!” Sarah’s voice reached a high pitch and broke like glass.

“State regulations. You can wait outside.” And he shut the door in her face.

The moment we were in the room alone together was when I felt panic creep in. It occurred to me that I was in a room with a complete stranger with several very sharp objects. I took several deep breaths and forced myself to relax.

“You okay?” he said, looking at me.

“Yup.”

“If you’re not, tell me the instant you’re not, and I stop. Promise.” He smiled at me. He was putting on his rubber gloves and cleaning several silver objects. I looked away.

“Now comes the fun part of my job,” he said with a devilish grin on his face. “Take off your shirt.”

I hesitated. “What’s your name? I don’t take my shirt off for people when I don’t at least know their first name,” I teased, delaying, making a joke of the situation.

“Steve. And you can trust me. Really. Your friends are right outside. Believe me, you ain’t got nothing my wife don’t got, and I’m a professional. Been piercing for about fifteen years now, got started out in California...”

And as he spoke, I felt myself hypnotized, doing exactly as he said, listening to him speak, and trusting him. It was like I was caught by his voice so entirely that I could not understand what was going on around me.

“Do you like Tori Amos?” he was saying when I felt that first little prick, not even really enough to hurt. “You look like the kind that would like her. My wife loves Tori. Anything with her piano music. Went to go see her in concert, too. Ever seen her in concert? No? Too bad, she’s amazing. . .” His voice went on and on, asking me questions, telling me little snippets of his life. “Well, you’re done. And let me just say that you handled it beautifully.”

Done? How could I be done? We were just having a conversation; it didn’t even feel like he was doing anything...and then I caught a glance in the mirror. He was telling the truth; there were the silver rings.

He handed me a paper with cleaning instructions and very sternly read them over to me as I put my shirt back on.

“Now go out and give ‘em a show,” he laughed.

I walked out the door. Sarah and Chris were standing there staring intently at me.

I smiled at them. “All done. Let’s go.”

The guy resumed his position behind the counter.

“Have a nice day!” he called out. “Come back and see us!”

We were filing out the door when Chris, who was right in front of me, stopped abruptly. I crashed into him. Jolts of pain raced like bolts of lightning through my chest.

“DAMN YOU!!!!” I screamed, and reached out to pinch his ear off, but he scuttled away, laughing.

I composed myself. “Come on, Sarah. Now that we have the whole car to ourselves, since someone evidently wanted to *walk* home...”

Chris stopped laughing. “You do,” he snarled, “and I tell Mom exactly where we’ve been all afternoon.”

I glared at him. “Get in the car, and you better not even *think* of fucking speaking the entire way home. Get it?”

“Got it.”

The ride home was pretty uneventful. Sarah dwelled on every final detail until she had completely worn out the subject and tarnished the newness of the piercing. They really were starting to hurt; a throbbing heat was coursing through my chest. Chris rode in the backseat again, drawing faces on his hands and miming Sarah’s chattering with hand puppets in my rearview mirror. By the time I dropped her off at her house, my sides were aching from held-in laughter. I have to hand it to him; my brother can be pretty funny when he wants to be.

I left Sarah on her driveway, promising to take care of the piercings *just* as the paper told me to, and promising to call her later. I drove directly to the apartments where we all lived, turned into my parking lot and got out, tired. Chris scrambled out of the backseat and, grabbing his backpack, ran off in the direction of his best friend’s house.

I sighed and looked up at our apartment window. The lights were on, meaning that my mother was already home and making dinner. I wondered how big of an inquisition she would make me endure if I asked to skip dinner tonight. The soreness was really starting to set in, and eating dinner was about the last thing that I wanted right now.

I trudged up the stairs and went in the door. I was starting to head for my room so I could change my clothes when I heard my mother's voice from the kitchen.

"Alexis? Come in here. We need to talk."

Oh, shit. Here we go. I wonder what it is I did that she found out about this time. I hope it doesn't take too long; I'm dying to run to the bathroom so I can put a cold washrag on my chest. The pain is starting to kill me.

I stepped into the kitchen, and Mom was sitting at the table, her Martha Stewart mug of hot chamomile tea in front of her. Her eyes swept down over the outfit, and she pursed her lips before she spoke, her eyebrows knit over her eyes.

"Where have you been? It's past six-thirty. I needed your help bringing in the groceries."

"Sorry, I didn't know. Chris ran off, probably to Ben's. He'll be home in a while. I had to stay late, my photography deadline is coming up and I had to use the dark room," I breathed, hoping it would be enough.

"And you couldn't call? Lex, I called your art teacher when you didn't show up; you weren't in the dark room after school."

I sighed, tried again. "Fine, I didn't want to tell you, but I had a detention after school; I would have called, but Mr. Davis is such a dick when he has to govern detentions."

"Try again, Lex. Try the truth. I had to go pick up some mat board from the art supply store on 87th. I saw your car at that tattoo shop."

I froze. Think, Lex, *think*. I sighed. Started over.

"Well, I didn't want to tell you, because I know you don't like me being around that stuff, but Sarah asked me if I would go with her to get her navel pierced, for

moral support and everything, and I told her it would be okay. She chickened out at the last minute, though, and didn't go through with it."

I forced myself to look my mother right in the eye. Sort of a staring showdown, daring her to find the fault in my words.

"Really," she mused, eyeing me. I glared as her eyes roved my face for an offending ring. Her eyes wandered to my waist.

"Let's see *your* navel."

"Jesus, Ma, why don't you just fucking strip search me as soon as I walk in the fucking door!" I exploded. I couldn't believe she was accusing me! I mean, I know I was guilty, but *she* didn't, and probable cause was no call for her to go invading my privacy this way. For a split second, fear made me wish I had not gotten my breasts pierced at all. But it lasted only a second.

"I told you to keep from using such language in my home, Alexis. And if you haven't brutally disfigured yourself again, you should have no problem with showing me your navel. Now, please."

I fought the urge to start screaming. I lifted my shirt just enough to expose my navel. "See?" I said sarcastically. "Look, ma! No piercings."

She sighed and shook her head. "It's always something with you, isn't it, Lex? Can't ever just be content to be normal. Always have to wear weird clothes, hair, etc. Always getting into fights at school, *smoking*."

She said "smoking" like it was a dirty word or something. I opened my mouth to protest.

"Save it, Lex. Do you think I can't smell it on you *every time* you walk in the house? Just how stupid do you think I am? Now, I suggest if you've done something weird to your body *again*, that you get rid of it before I see it. Tattoos *say* something about you, Lex, and it's not what you want people to see. The only people I see with tattoos are weirdos. Do you want people to think you're a weirdo? Not only that, but it reflects badly on *me*. Every time you act up, every time you pull something, I get to hear about it. I get to see people look at me and wonder

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what sort of job I did raising you to be like *this*. And I have news for you, Alexis. I'm sick and tired of it. You may think you're so wonderful, being *different*, making a statement, but people don't want to understand *why* you are a certain way; they just assume that you're weird. And you may not think so, but it closes doors for you, Lex. It really does."

I had been staring at my shoes during the lecture, and now I raised my eyes. She was giving me the disappointed look again.

"Not that it matters or anything," I lied, "because I haven't done anything to my body, which, by the way, I think is total crap that I get lectured for basically being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but it doesn't seem to bother *me* as much as it does *you* what other people think of me. I refuse to associate myself with people who would judge me based on my appearance anyways."

She sighed again. "You still don't understand. You don't always have that choice. And I would hate to see you lose out on a job interview or a college interview based on something as trivial as the clothes you had on. And you're not even considering what *I* go through as a result of your behavior and such. I hate it when people look at me like my daughter's a freak!

"So," she said, resigning herself. "Tomorrow's Saturday, and you and I are going shopping for some new clothes. And we're going to get rid of some of these things you wear that make you look like a deviant. And we're going to work on that behavior of yours, too. Because I'm about fed up with all of this.

"Maybe you think you're above all of this, that you're eighteen now and can just do whatever you want, but part of growing up means assuming the responsibility of knowing that maybe you *shouldn't* do everything you want."

"Fine," I spat, turning and walking away. "I'll just go wash off all this cigarette smoke I seem to have acquired. And since I'm apparently going to be a weirdo until I get these new clothes, I'll just stay out of your normal little

life ‘til then.” I infused each word with all the hatred I could muster.

I closed the bedroom door behind me and very carefully removed my shirt. It had been too painful to wear a bra home. I looked at myself in the mirror.

Damn, even though they were a lot of trouble, with my ma and with how much they hurt, they looked so cool. They exemplified perfectly my rebelliousness. They hurt really badly, though. Blood was beginning to crust on the silver rings. It would be hard, but I would get through this. After all, I’d never heard of anyone dying of nipple piercings before. This was worse than the tattoo, though. Just these, I told myself. Just these and I’ll never pierce anything ever again.

I let my eyes meander around my room, which was decorated with all sorts of vintage movie posters. My eyes stopped on *Amazon Women in the Jungle of Love*. It was my favorite poster, even though I had never seen the movie. I think the guy who sold it to me said that it was some sort of circa 1970’s porn film, which I found incredibly humorous.

“See?” I said, facing the women in fur bikinis. “Now I’m an Amazon, too! I don’t need shit from anyone! I am in charge of MY OWN LIFE!” I laughed, not noticing my damn cat pushing open the door to my room and coming in. I was still laughing when I looked up and noticed my mom standing in the doorway, a look of combined horror and revulsion on her face.

“Mom, I...”

But she turned and walked away. I could hear her rummaging in a drawer in the kitchen, clanking utensils together. Shit. Now I was going to get it for sure.

I pulled on a T-shirt and went back out to the kitchen.

“Mom, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to lie to you, I just knew that telling you would make you even more disappointed in me than you already were, and I really wanted to do this, but I didn’t want to disappoint you so I...”

She turned on me, her face red with rage.

“Disappointed? Lex is that what you thought? Never mind, I can’t even comprehend what you think.” She slammed the silver shape that was in her hand down on the table with a bang so hard it made my ears ring.

“I’m much worse than disappointed, Lex. I’m *fucking ashamed* to have you as my daughter.”

I had never heard my mother swear. I looked at her, standing there red-faced, tears of rage and pain and utter frustration in her eyes. I sighed and turned around, went back to my room. I left the pliers on the table, knowing that they would be there later if I should need them.

Beau Boudreaux

Constantinople

He stood naked at one of two windows
she kept open in all weathers in her corner
room at the back of the bread building

as the sun rose he watched a man pulling
a handcart along the narrow alley
“below here, the moans”

and across the court a girl turning
her face from side to side in a mirror—
“aren’t those sweet, those questionings?”

From the temples around the stone plaza
he could hear the first martins
and to the west low clouds
shifted beyond the dulled bronze domes of the church

she begins slicing small pieces of bread
goat butter and chives start to fry
she is naked kneeling on one worn rug
thrown at an angle across the scarred floor

this is a reminder

she glances up at him and he smiles, nodding
for no real reason in spite of the bells’
chime and the tanks crisscrossing the city

Jonathan Tipton

Hot and Sour Soup

There were two things that Andrew Quick wanted from a woman: love and respect. Now, one might be inclined to believe that these two entities borrowed traits from one another, but Andrew believed that they were different.

“Love,” says Andrew, “is a feeling, like an emotion. You might have reasons why you have that particular emotion at the time, but you don’t have to have a reason. Like love: you don’t have to have a reason to love someone. You might just love them because you do and that’s all you know.”

People would sometimes look at him strangely when he told them this, but mostly they would agree, noting that love, like an emotion, tends to fade from moment to moment. It was for this reason that Andrew valued respect.

“Respect,” says Andrew, “is an action. You can’t just *have* respect; you have to earn it. I want the woman I love to be willing to love me and respect me. But most of all, I want her to know the difference between the two.”

Andrew walked into the back room fridge of C.J.’s Bistro in north Topeka, Kansas. He had been working there for about two years, but he didn’t really think much of it. A café was a café. He had been in and out of bistros and delis and coffee shops since he was fifteen, which tallied up to roughly six years under his belt in the Euro-bistro scene.

Andrew looked around on the shelves of the fridge, searching for what to have for dinner. Peering around the relabeled containers of ricotta cheese, he slid a box of mushrooms to the side to discover the day-old remains of yesterday’s soup special: Hot and Sour Soup.

Andrew loved hot and sour soup: shiitake mushrooms sliced with cubed pork and shredded chicken in a spicy ginger broth. He would often be heard saying that hot and sour soup was the perfect cure for a hangover. He was fairly correct in his assumptions, too. One of the main ingredients of the broth was

vinegar, which purged the system of most toxic substances in a fairly short time. But Andrew didn't know that. He just knew that it was one of the few foods he would be able to stomach after a heavy night of partying, and it was, after all, Saturday. He seized the container formerly known as "Peanut Butter," and opened the top to look inside. "Mmmm..."

He popped the lid back on the container, letting the vinegary ginger seep into his nostrils. He could still smell it in his nose when he stepped out of the walk-in back into the bistro. Hot and sour soup in hand, Andrew strode up to the front, addressing the *barista* behind the counter.

"Hey, Bruce. I'm taking this leftover soup, is that cool?"

"Yes, please," said Bruce. "If you don't eat it, no one will." Bruce held his nose for a moment, as if he could still smell it, too. Andrew thanked him and clocked out.

Andrew pulled his old beat-up Pontiac Grand Prix into the parking lot of his apartment complex over near the intersection of Fairlawn and Huntoon. Pulling the faceplate off his tape-deck stereo, he reached over to the passenger's seat and picked up the fruits of his daily working endeavors: leftovers. Grabbing his backpack, Andrew leaned his way out of the car and shut the door behind him with a flailing foot, cradling the peanut butter container filled with hot and sour soup. He swung his backpack over his shoulder and sighed.

Andrew fumbled with his keys for a moment, balancing the cups with one hand while juggling for the right key with the other. The things one has to do for free food, he thought. He unlocked the door to his apartment and entered, wobbling here and there, until he finally made his way to the small closet with a sink, oven, and refrigerator that the landlord called a kitchen. Yes, it was small, but it was cheap.

He looked over to the answering machine to see a blinking red light. He tossed his pack on the couch in the "living room" and neatly placed the spicy broth on the bottom shelf of the fridge. He turned back towards the blinking light and poked at a button.

"Hi, baby! It's me, I thought that I'd call to let you know that I love you and that I miss you very much and I can't wait to see you next weekend. I'm going to come up on Wednesday to watch you read! So...that'll be fun. Um...I wasn't sure if Megs

or Bri were going to come out, but I'd like to see them while I'm in town, so you might want to give them a call...<sigh>...I really miss you! Call me. I love you, bye."

Melissa. She was cool. The first cool girl Andrew had ever dated, to his knowledge. She was spending her last summer with her parents before heading off to New York. New York. Wow, that's pretty far away, Andrew thought. I wonder if she'll wait for me. Andrew had two years left of Washburn University Pre-law before he could even think about living in the same state as Melissa. He thought for a moment about calling her, but quickly decided that Megs and Bri were probably waiting for him, so he should probably call them first. Another message:

"Hey! What's up about cats? This is Megan, and...I was giving you a call because you told me that you had some...stuff...that you wanted me to...look over. It's about 4:00, now, and I wasn't sure if you would be home before *that time*. I think you know what I mean...like...some time in the next twenty minutes or so. But...if you're *not* home before then, just gimme a call. I'll be over at Bri's probably. Talk to you later, buh-bye."

Bri and Megs had some strange inside jokes. There was a time when the two of them had gotten stoned one night and they decided to make a book about cats and how they were like people. Megs said that every cat had their own personality, which may sound like a valid theory. She decided that she and Bri would write a book about her theories and call it "What's Up About Cats?" They were strange, but at least Andrew wouldn't be left without entertainment.

"End of messages." Andrew grabbed the phone with the big numbers on it and dragged it into the "living room," dangling the cord all the way through the "dining room" to the "kitchen." He dialed Bri's number. Nobody home. He left a quick message:

"Hey kids, it's Andy. I wanted to see if you kids were up for some partying tonight. I don't have any *goodies* for anyone, but I do have beer, so gimme a call if you're interested. Thanks, 'bye."

Andrew took off his shoes and socks, a ritual to which he had grown quite accustomed since dating Melissa, and flipped on the stereo. He poked at the "random" button and sighed. Andrew didn't have a television, and he prided himself on this. He felt that if the news wasn't worthy enough for NPR, then it

wasn't worth hearing. He sank into his multi-generation-hand-me-down couch and lit a cigarette before considering whether or not he should call Melissa. Grabbing the geriatric-numbered phone, he dialed some numbers.

"Hello?" a charming feminine voice on the line cooed.

"Baby!" Andrew cried, feigning desperation.

"Baby!!" responded Melissa, recognizing the cry.

"Bay-beeeee!! How you been?" Andrew pushed.

"Ohhhhhh..." sighed Melissa. "I miss you."

"I miss you too, Mel..." Andrew hugged her with his words.

"How have you been?" Melissa asked.

"Fine, fine," Andrew thought aloud, "but I have got so much shit going on."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Melissa agreed. "I had to get up at 6:00 this morning to get to work by 7:15."

"Yeah, I had to get up at 6:00 to be at work by 6:30 this morning," said Andrew, upping the ante.

"Oh, poor baby..." Melissa always thought that it was worse for Andrew, even if it wasn't. She always let him guilt her into feeling worse for him than she should, even when she was in a far worse spot than he was. This was probably because Andrew had been working his way toward an undergrad in pre-law at Washburn. He was supposed to finish out his undergrad work in Topeka before moving back East with her. It had been about a week since they had last seen each other face-to-face. Money tends to be tight when the only occupation you know is working in a café. "Then I had to work brunch at Ya-Ya's...<blech>...You know, I'm sorry. I have to bitch about work, baby," Melissa urged, preparing Andrew for a session of sympathy and encouragement.

"Okay, baby," said Andrew. "What happened?"

"Well, there's that lady that I've told you about, Marge?" she asked.

"Yeah, right."

"Yeah, well, she was working today and I *thought* that I was supposed to take care of the dessert molds for that great big convention that I told you about?"

"Yeah?"

“Right, well, that was *today*...” She went on. Melissa talked as if this was the most important event in her life, which it was. It might not be everyone’s passion to do what Melissa does, but she does it with all her heart and soul. She was going to be a chef. Her main focus was to finish out her summer service at Ya-Ya’s, a locally-owned Wichita, Kansas-based restaurant. Then she would be off to New York for two years of culinary school at the Culinary Institute of America, in Hyde Park. She had been planning these things for years, and it still seemed as if it was all happening by surprise and almost against her will.

Andrew listened to every word she had to say. He brought small bits and pieces of the conversation back up, just to make sure he understood everything, and added witty banter from time to time. References to sex, “What’s Up About Cats?” and pop movie quotes always seemed to cheer her up.

“My, uh, little brother. Just got his arm caught in the microwave, and my, uh, grandma dropped acid and freaked out...and hijacked a school bus...full of...penguins...so, it’s kind of a family emergency. ‘kay? Thanks...” By the end of the line, both of them were saying the same words. They giggled like two sick, twisted, friendship-bracelet-wearing junior-high rejects. “I just froze the entire left half of my brain!!!!.....LOOK! I can’t move my right arm!”¹ They laughed some more.

“So, did you call your sister yet?” urged Melissa.

“No,” strained Andrew.

“I forgot. I’ll call her later.”

“Baby?” Melissa warned.

“What? There’s still three weeks before we go up there.”

Andrew and Melissa planned on attending a friend’s wedding in Madison, Wisconsin, where Andrew’s sister Beth lived.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to drive all the way to Madison and find out that they aren’t ready for us to be there.”

“Baby, I told them two months ago that we were going to be there for Rodney’s wedding. You know that Beth won’t mind letting us stay with her a couple days. What’s the big deal?” Andrew coughed.

“Baby, this is our first trip together. I mean...”

“Yeah, I know,” Andrew said. “I know.”

“Two years, Andrew. That’s twice as long as we’ve been dating.”

“Yes, but you know that we’re going to make it through this, right?” Andrew sounded hesitant.

“Yes,” Melissa replied, not making the greatest effort to sound too encouraging.

“Melissa?”

“Yes?”

“You do think we’re going to make it, don’t you?” A long silence absorbed the phone line.

“I have no doubt that we will,” Melissa stated.

“You’re just saying that because you know that I need validation,” Andrew chuckled.

“No, but...” said Melissa. “But you know what I mean. I’m going to be busy, *you’re* going to be busy. Neither of us will have time to start any other kind of romance, and if we did, we’d probably just frustrate the hell out of the other person because we were so busy with school. So...how *couldn’t* we make it?” She was always the voice of encouragement. “Can you hang on? I’ve got to use the ladies’.”

“Sure,” Andrew drawled. Melissa always called it the “ladies’.” It wasn’t the “bathroom” or the “restroom.” Come to think of it, it was never really a *room* when Melissa mentioned it. It was a state of mind. A time and place when and where you can sit and think about whatever you want. Melissa would sometimes say that people are themselves only when they’re sitting on the toilet. Andrew chuckled as he thought about this notion. He was still chuckling when she picked up the receiver again.

The phone line was quiet.

“Baby?” Melissa asked in a strange voice.

“Yeah, baby?”

“I just found something.”

“What did you find? A parking ticket? A check stub? What?” Andrew was trying to keep the moment more light-hearted than it was in reality.

“A bump.”

“A bump?” asked Andrew, hitting pause on the stereo. “What kind of bump? What, did you hit your knee? What?” You could tell that Andrew was a little worried.

"I found..." said Melissa, "a *bump*." A long silence followed.

There had been a scare about a year and a half before this particular phone call that led Melissa to believe that she might have had herpes. It was a very melodramatic time in her life, before she started dating Andrew. She had gotten involved with a morally questionable character, and ever since then, she had been nothing less than paranoid. In her two-week "relationship" with this guy, she had gone out several times, decided that it wasn't working, and dumped him. The night she broke it off, he came over to her house and bashed out her windows with a Louisville Slugger. He also spread a vicious rumor that she had given him herpes. This had been a year and a half ago, and still neither of them had borne any symptoms. Andrew thought that all of this was kind of childish; this fear of nothing, this rumor, this lie. Granted, she had been tested and the results were negative, but the thought haunted her still, and Andrew knew it. He knew she would always be afraid of the moment when her fate would be sealed in an envelope. He knew that she had broken down a time or two when dealing with the aftermath of that first scare. He remembered building their relationship on her emotional recovery, and he knew that she respected his decisions concerning these matters, especially since they directly affected his own personal well-being.

"Where did you find this...bump?" Andrew drove the discussion to the heart of the matter.

"Where do you *think* I found it?"

"Okay..." said Andrew, "is it in your breast?" He was definitely annoyed, or at least he sounded like he was.

"Not a *lump*, baby, a *bump*..." said Melissa. "Lower."

"What do you mean, lower?"

"*Lower*."

"You mean you have a...a bump...on your..." Andrew remembered hearing stories of how people could turn up positive for some venereal diseases months after passing a clean test. He thought about Melissa's scare last year.

"Well," said Melissa, more worried than Andrew.

"Yes."

"Whoa," said Andrew, collecting his thoughts. He had always thought that he was careful. He had always tried to be,

especially after helping Melissa through her tough times last year. But this was different. “Are you telling me what I think you’re telling me?” He remained calm, though his words sounded very panicked, indeed.

“Yes, I think.” Melissa wasn’t going to use specifics, even if it killed her.

“What?” said Andrew.

“Are you telling me that you think we have something?” Andrew slowly gathered the concept of this grim reality. He didn’t think, he just talked. This might explain why some of the things were said.

“No, I’m not—”

“—’Cause that’s what it sounds like to me.” Andrew heard himself getting angry. He often got angry at things he didn’t understand, and disease was as far as an island can be from his one-bedroom apartment in Topeka.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. Will you calm down?”

“*Calm down?!?*” Andrew had lost his temper. “What the *fuck* are you telling me to *calm down* for? I am *perfectly* calm.”

“Please, baby,” Melissa pleaded. What followed was long silence interrupted by moments of panic. “I’m sorry...or whatever...I can’t fix this.”

“Are you crying?” asked Andrew.

“No,” said Melissa, though now that Andrew had brought up the subject, it didn’t seem like that bad of an idea to her.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Andrew apologized. “I’m sorry. I’m soooooo sorry...please...will you talk to me?” He didn’t even know what to think.

“Okay...” Melissa sniffled. “What?”

“Well,” said Andrew. “What kind of bump is it?”

“*What?!?*”

“No, I mean,” continued Andrew. “Does it look like anything really serious?”

“How am I supposed to know?” sobbed Melissa. “Do you think I *know* about these things?”

“Well, I wasn’t sure,” said Andrew, “and I just wanted to know if you were sure that it’s—”

“—You think I’m a *slut*, don’t you?” challenged Melissa.

“Where the hell did that come from?”

"You think I slept around before I met you?" Melissa was getting defensive. "Is that it?"

"No, baby," Andrew returned, "I don't. I *never* said anything like that and you *know* I never would." He felt helpless, and he knew that there was nothing that could be said that would make it all better. Melissa sobbed heavily on the phone. "Melissa, I love you."

"I know, baby," Melissa choked out. "I love you too...I just can't...believe that this is happening." She blew her nose and composed herself.

"But it's *not* happening, is it?" Andrew sounded encouraging.

"Yes, I know," crooned Melissa, "but I don't know what's going on with my body, and that scares me."

"Well, it scares me too," said Andrew. "I don't know what the hell is going on, you're living 150 miles away from me, and we both might have some kind of disease. That's all I know." A long silence followed.

"There's nothing to worry about," Melissa declared.

"No, there's not. Not yet."

"No, not yet," she decreed. "I'll just go to the doctor and we'll figure out what it is, right?"

"Yeah," agreed Andrew. "Set up an appointment as soon as you can, and call me when everything's checked out, okay?"

"Okay, baby." Melissa seemed more sure of herself now. She thought for a moment. "Baby?" she asked. "Would your feelings change about me if you found out we were positive with something?"

"Well, that's kind of a loaded question to ask at a time like this, don't you think?" Andrew regretted having said the words at the instant they left his lips.

"Would you still love me?"

"Well..." Andrew thought for a while. Andrew and Melissa had more of a grasp on decisions concerning this issue than most might assume. "Yes. I would."

"Would you?"

"Yes."

"Even if we turn up positive for some venereal disease?"

"I would rather go through this with you than with anyone else," Andrew admitted, redeeming his moral character. "Would you still love me?"

"You know I would, baby," Melissa cooed. "And knowing that you would love me through thick and thin is one of the reasons why I respect you so much. You know that."

"Yeah," said Andrew. "As if two years in a long distance relationship isn't enough to endure."

"Baby? Are you okay?" Melissa asked.

"Yeah," shrugged Andrew. "I just...I just need to calm down."

"Well, I'm going to call a doctor and see if I can set up some kind of appointment for tomorrow," Melissa stated.

"Yes," urged Andrew. "You do that. I'm going to get back to...whatever it was that I was doing." He desperately thought about what it was he had planned for the evening.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Hanging out with Megs and Bri."

"Well, tell them 'hi' for me."

"I will."

"I love you, baby."

"I love you too, Melissa...bye."

Andrew hung up the phone and stared blankly at the *Willy Wonka* poster that hung on his wall for ten minutes in dead silence before the phone rang. It rang twice. Three times. Andrew picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" Andrew was in a daze.

"Hey, Andy!" It was Megs. "I'm over at Bri's. You want to come over?"

"No," said Andrew. "I really don't feel like going anywhere just now."

"Oh, come on..."

"No, thank you."

"Well," whined Megs. "You wanted to hang out tonight."

"Yeah, but I just don't want to leave my phone, okay?"

Andrew sounded annoyed.

"All right," Megs chirped. "Then we're coming over to your place. Is that cool?"

"Yeah, that's all right."

"We'll see you in about ten minutes, okay?"

“All right,” said Andrew. “See you then.” He hung up. Bri and Megs are coming over—again, he thought.

Andrew stood up, wiped his eyes, and pushed “play” on the stereo. The song “Leash” by Pearl Jam pounded loud and relentless. He stopped the album and found a more suitable collection, calming his already tense nerves.

“Guess what we have!”

Bri and Megan showed up with copious amounts of illegal and store-bought paraphernalia, bound and determined to have one hellacious weekend: two full cases of Miller High Life, a half-ounce of marijuana (minus one enormous blunt which Megs held in her hand), and enough noise to wake up half of the old people in Andrew’s apartment complex from their mid-afternoon siesta. They sat on the couch and lit cigarettes before breaking out the cards and beer. Andrew thought, at first, that he was too depressed to think about drinking or whatnot, but the pure and plain truth was a little disappointing. He looked at the beer a long time before he took his first swig of the evening. Then he took another. Then a couple more.

They played two rounds of a game they called “Circle of Death” before the numbness crept over Andrew’s body, penetrating his very soul, sedating his confusion, calming his sickness. They passed around the blunt until it was merely a black little nub of tar and drugs, then they smoked that in a metal pipe. Andrew had solved the problem for the time being, and that would have to do.

He thought hard about whether or not he should tell Bri and Megs. But he decided against it, noting that they wouldn’t understand anything like this. Like this? Andrew thought. Like this? What is *this* like? Andrew didn’t know. He didn’t know anything. Andrew rose to collect his thoughts.

“Where’re you going?” Bri asked.

“The kitchen,” Andrew retorted, visibly annoyed. “Can I get you anything?”

“Sure, a beer would be great,” he laughed and winked at Andrew.

“Sure,” he said. “Not a problem. Can I get you anything else?”

“Oh, I’d like one, too,” suggested Megs, to see how far Andrew could be pushed.

“Oh, but of course,” Andrew replied. “Anything else?”

“No, that’ll be all for now,” smiled Bri.

Andrew walked into the “kitchen” and opened up the refrigerator to grab the beers. Staring him in the face was a small container labeled “Peanut Butter” in bold type. On the lid to the container, the words “Hot and Sour Soup” screamed in bold black script. He plucked two beers out of the fridge and delivered them to Bri and Megs.

“Hey,” Andrew urged excitedly, “do you guys want some hot and sour soup?”

“What’s that?” asked Megs.

“Well, it’s really spicy and its got chicken and pork...here, check it out...” Andrew strode to the “kitchen” and wrapped his fingers around the lip of the container. He slowly lifted his hands, inching it out little by little until he noticed his fingers starting to slip. All of a sudden, the lid popped clean off the container, and the precious, prized soup rained to the floor.

SPLAT!

Tiny splatters shot from the container in every direction. Then, when the container hit the floor, even more was splashed up from the bottom of the container all over the ancient crusty countertops. The “kitchen” was soaked with the permeating substance that covered the floor, leaked under the fridge, and climbed all over the wall. Soup was everywhere. This normally wouldn’t have been a problem, but due to the fact that it was hot and sour, the aroma filling the kitchen made Andrew’s eyes well up with frustration, vinegar, and helplessness.

He stared at the floor for a moment, feeling even more helpless. As Megs and Bri were alerted to the sound of soup spilling all over the “kitchen” floor, he thought about everything that had happened. Bri and Megs glanced over his shoulders as he stared and thought about Melissa. Ginger pierced his nasal passages with its sharp citrus intensity. If Melissa was positive, then... God, he didn’t want to think about that. Vinegar and sour pork floated into his brain and reminded him of using smelly chemicals to clean the stains off the coffeepots at work. He wondered if he had enough stamina to see it all through. He thought about hot and sour soup, and its mystical cleansing properties. The odor screamed at him from all around the room as Bri and Megs stood in silence. He reached underneath the

sink and pulled out an old washcloth. This soup was supposed to cleanse Andrew, and that was just what it was doing. Every breath he took reminded him that the only thing he could do was clean everything up and hope for the best. Maybe it wouldn't solve all his problems, but it would at least help him deal with them for the time being, and that was all he could do.

"Do you want any help?" asked Megs.

"No, I've got it." Andrew seemed to be in good spirits about this, surprising Megan and Bri.

"Are you sure?" posed Bri.

"Yes," said Andrew. "I'll take care of it. Please. Let me."

They sat in the "living room" and Andrew swiped at the floor, wondering if he would ever learn how to respect himself as much as he respected Melissa. He felt the cleansing odor seep into his system as he scoured the pungent floor tiles. He also knew that everything, no matter what was going to happen, was going to be okay, as long as he solved one problem at a time. It had to be.

¹ The movie is *Better off Dead*, for those of you keeping score at home.

Katie Sallitt Fallon

Cave Darkness

"This is how we get in," he told me. Jesse (my then-boyfriend) and I stood halfway up a small rocky mountain in central Pennsylvania. Snowflakes dotted the clay-colored rocks as I stared at a drainage pipe coming out of the mountain. It was black and looked slippery and the diameter of its opening could not have been more than two feet. Appalled, I refused.

"I'll never fit," I said.

"I fit."

"My hips are too wide," I assured him.

"Andy fits and he weighs two hundred pounds."

"Impossible. Let's go home." I turned away from Jesse and began down the thin trail.

"Oh, come on," he said, and grabbed my sleeve. "Please."

I've always had considerable trouble refusing a request from Jesse, especially when he begs. I turned back to face the tiny pipe and sighed. Why had I agreed to come out here with him? As he excitedly adjusted his headlamp and began instructing me on how to enter the cave, I realized how much it meant to him that I was out here, in early December, in cargo pants from the Army and Navy store and one of his stained "painting" sweatshirts, preparing to go with him into some hole in a mountain.

"You start with your hands out in front of you, then you squirm your body in, and then you inch along until you feel the other end of the pipe with your hands. Then you just pull yourself out. Easy," he said. "The pipe's only about six feet long."

"And then what?"

"Then you're in. I'll be right behind you."

"Will you push my feet to help me?" I asked weakly.

“Of course,” he said. “Just be careful when you come out of the pipe. There’s a good four-foot drop to the cave floor.”

Great, I thought, and turned on the headlamp. I did as he showed me, and, arms out in front of me, I began to shimmy on my belly through the horizontal pipe. I had the distinct suspicion this was not meant for people.

After what seemed like much more than a six-foot crawl, my fingertips curled around the other lip of the pipe and I pulled myself to the edge. The light from my headlamp filled the closet-sized cavity, illuminating the rich red-orange sandstone walls that glistened with moisture. I could devise no other option than to stretch my hands to the floor of the cave and squirm the rest of my body gently down. The plan worked, except for the “gently” part, but besides a bruise or two, I emerged from the pipe unscathed.

As I rose to my feet and wiped my muddy hands on my pants, Jesse slipped effortlessly from the pipe. The two of us were cramped in the small cavity, and neither of us could stand up straight.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” he asked, his voice sounding very loud.

I grunted and looked back through the pipe. The flurries seemed to be falling faster now, and I immediately envisioned us returning here after our adventure to find the pipe blocked by snow. Then I imagined the flurries turning to drizzle and freezing over the mouth of the pipe. What if the man whose property we were trespassing on decided to come out this evening and seal the pipe?

“Ok, let’s go home now,” I suggested. Jesse ignored me and was already making his way to a narrow crevice between rocks.

“We go through here,” he said, pointing. “We call this the ‘Birth Canal.’ You might have to crawl a little bit. Just follow me.” He entered the crevice sideways and bent over. Sighing again, I reluctantly peered into the crack after him. I could hear his jeans scraping between the rocks and saw him in a position resembling a person making a snow angel, though Jesse was standing up and his face was turned sideways to fit. I inched along behind him, the cool rock

walls touching all of my body at once. I couldn't draw a deep breath, and the terror of suffocating filled my throat.

Jesse stopped moving in front of me and squirmed around to face the direction we were heading. "Watch how I do this part," he said. "It's a little tricky." He bent at the waist over a smooth rock that partially blocked the passage and reached ahead of himself with his hands. He pushed off the floor and slid through the hole. I heard shuffling and then the beam of his headlamp shone back through to me. "Come on," he urged, "Sort of dive through like I did."

"I can't breathe," I said.

"This is the worst part."

I didn't believe him, but I bent over the rock and reached through the hole. Jesse grabbed my wrists and pulled me through.

Beyond the Birth Canal, the ceiling was just high enough to stand up normally and footprints in the mud showed a distinct path. There was even a "guest book," rolled up and sealed in a waterproof container, chained to a wall. "I told you," he said, pointing to his friend Andy's signature on a muddy page. I scribbled my name on the last line with the short pencil from the container. Jesse signed on the same line.

The winding path led us past impressive rock formations, including "Goliath," a green and orange glistening pillar formed when a stalactite and stalagmite met. Jesse described another formation as "an old man pissing against the wall," and I admit, at first glance it did resemble a figure urinating.

I was not exactly sure if we had been progressing forward through the cave or had been circling around, but the next obstacle we encountered was called the "high-way step-across." As I reached for handholds and kicked for footholds climbing up vertical, slippery sandstone, I wondered if there was a "low-way" we had conveniently missed. Once on top of the rock (and claustrophobically close to the ceiling of the cave), I realized that the formation was actually two huge rocks with an apparently bottomless ravine between them.

“Don’t fall down there,” Jesse warned me. We had to sit on one side of the ravine and extend our feet across to the other side and scoot ourselves along sideways on our butts. I envisioned my body slipping into the pit, cracking off sharp rocks and finally thudding onto more sharp rocks hundreds of feet below. Certainly a rescue team couldn’t get a stretcher through the Birth Canal. It did, however, give me some confidence to know that this muddy hole we were crawling, squeezing and scraping through had been mapped and remapped and was used frequently (with permission) by the local university’s Grotto Club.

After the step-across, Jesse pointed to a crack between rocks called “Jane’s Frustration,” which I deemed impassable and refused to entertain the idea of attempting to squeeze through. (Again, he tried to convince me that his two hundred pound friend had been able to wiggle through it, but I didn’t believe him, and still don’t.) Then we came to the “Boy Scout Hole,” a space between rocks where, legend has it, a boy scout fell through and injured himself severely, or maybe even died (Jesse couldn’t remember which).

After a short squirm through another tight space, we reached a place called the “Wedding Cake Room,” so named because of its unusual stalagmite formations. In this room we sat and turned off our headlamps for a few minutes. “There’s no darkness like cave darkness,” Jesse said, and I think he was right. I have never felt so cut off from the rest of the world; besides being totally black, the cave was completely silent. My senses seemed to stop working, except for the smell of damp mud and the cold air on my face. I turned my head from side to side and blinked rapidly, waiting in vain for my eyes to adjust to the dark. The weight of the mountain above us settled over my shoulders and I thought instantly of a grave. Buried, forgotten, underground. Invisible. Even though my body hadn’t moved, I became disoriented and panicked and fumbled for Jesse. Of course, he sat only inches from me, and we huddled together for a few moments before I flicked my light back on.

Next came more crawling and climbing, and Jesse said we were approaching the “Dome Room.” “We usually use a rope for this part,” he said, but we continued on anyway,

groping along the side of the cave throughout the descent. After sliding down the steep and muddy incline, the cave opened up to a room with a ceiling as high as a cathedral. The walls narrowed near the top, as if someone had begun carving a church and then abandoned the project. We couldn't spend much time here because of the slippery footing.

Finally, it was time to make our way out of the cave, which did not seem nearly as demanding as getting in. I scooted the step-across with ease and stopped to admire more rock formations. I noticed two or three things, resembling crumpled brown tissues, stuck to the red walls. "Jesse," I asked, "those aren't bats, are they?"

He replied, "This is the first time you've noticed them? Haven't you felt them flying past you?"

I recalled the wind I'd felt on my face during "cave darkness" in the Wedding Cake Room and my knees weakened. "Let's go," I whispered, and squirmed through the Birth Canal, troubled by visions of rabid bats attacking my face.

As we approached the pipe and freedom, I became aware someone was on the other end of it, outside. The property owner, I thought. An escaped mental patient. What could we do? We were trapped. I remembered Jesse's father telling us how he killed groundhogs on his farm by shooting his gun into their burrows.

"Hello," Jesse called through the pipe.

"No!" I gasped, tugging his sleeve and shaking my head.

"Come on out," a raspy voice answered. Jesse motioned for me to climb into the pipe.

"You go first," I whispered. "I'll be right behind you."

Jesse shrugged and scrambled in. When he was through, I followed. I didn't hear any sounds of struggle or murder, so I figured it was all right.

Jesse and the other person helped me out so I didn't go tumbling down the mountainside. I straightened and looked at the stranger. He was an elderly man, about five feet tall, dressed in old-time gear. His headlamp was a curved mirror around a gas flame. The fuel was in a flask on his

utility belt, next to various ropes and tools. Jesse shook his hand and introduced himself and I did the same.

“Are you two with the Grotto Club?” the man asked cheerfully.

“I’m thinking about joining,” Jesse answered.

“But this is her first time caving.”

“Wonderful!” he said. “Did you have a good time?”

“Oh, yes,” I enthusiastically lied.

Jesse and the old man laughed. “You’re lucky,” he said to Jesse, nodding at me, “I could never get my wife to go in a cave with me. When I was a boy, this was a limestone mine.” He pulled a pair of heavy leather gloves from his belt. “You two should join the Grotto Club. I give lectures for them sometimes. Nice meeting you both,” he continued, and slipped into the pipe.

Walking back down the thin trail that night, covered in bruises and mud and slightly disturbed by being mistaken for Jesse’s wife, I silently vowed never to go caving again. But now, years later, my memories of being inside that mountain are somewhat exciting, even nostalgic. Perhaps it was the prospect of danger that was so thrilling, even though Jesse assured me over and over that J-4 (as the cave is known) was not that dangerous (as far as caves go).

A confined black space that could possibly “cave” in and trap me is terrifying; so is having only one escape route that could potentially be blocked. But, together we were willing to huddle on the floor of a bat-filled room, so silent and dark and cool that slipping unknowingly into death seemed possible. I wonder if Jesse (my now-husband) was trying to suggest something by taking me to a place with so many marriage motifs, from the “guest book” to the “church” and the “wedding cake.” The “Birth Canal” and “Frustration” could also be construed to fit this metaphor. Perhaps even the old man was staged, coached by Jesse to make mention of me as his wife.

Of course, I’m reaching here. I’m sure Jesse’s intentions were merely to spend time alone with me, and to help me through something he enjoyed. In a place where I couldn’t run away.

Kevin Gonzáles

Julio, El Barbero

He fled Cuba in the Sixties to neighbor isle
Puerto Rico and became an *estadista*.

You can't blame him, argued my father,
a statehooder himself, against my claim:

*He should shut up, support the cause
or leave. La estadidad is not an option.*

The cause meant independence. I was fifteen,
disciplined by my heart's blind politics.

I bore the same style since six, when
a phonebook hoisted my face onto the mirror,

a few inches off Julio's effort.
Every month he asked me what I wanted

and I said *the same thing*,
my father next in turn for the chair

that had cradled him for thirty years.
At nine, I had memorized his story

of exile, the whisper of scissors
cutting air as he paced around me.

On Havana nights, he was a tenor.
Barber by day. Deacon on weekends.

It was hard, but we went on...
his nostalgia-thick breath collapsing

gradually into ruin. At thirteen,
I derailed our dialogue to baseball

but the off-season proved a problem.
He likes the Yankees, that's no surprise.

In Puerto Rico he is choir director
of his church. *Not the same thing*

as a deacon or a tenor, he implies
in a blank stare towards the mirror.

I am older now, two phonebooks taller
than Julio, still an *independentista*

but understanding of the cause of others.
I am sorry for him, a life confined

to scissors whispers and remembrance.
He deserves to talk and I owe to listen,

to sit still as when his razor soothes me.
I should root for the Yankees so he can win one.

I lean back on the chair, familiar haven.
He speaks of mid-century hurricanes

striking Cuba. Shreds of hair slump
toward the ground, dispelled memories.

Kevin Gonzáles

Checkmate on the Eleventh Floor

New Year's Eve, 1986

I learn to play chess on our dining table,
my small hands cold against marble, my father
correcting my wrong moves. He stares
at his watch as if expectant of midnight fireworks,
heaven reflecting on our windows, the vibrant
alarm clock of drowsy angels.

My mother bustles in the bedroom, speaking
to herself, her voice a quaint gust
above the thunder of shutting drawers,
the jangle of hangers dropped on tiles.

My father reaches for the stereo, a soft
aguinaldo glides through the room, drowning
the smudged strain of the bedroom. He
gently shifts a pawn, his two fingers
like parentheses containing its brief torso,
retrieves his glass, a ring of sweat on the table.
He coaches my pawn into his, shows me to set
lost pieces aside like sour grapes, I assume
he didn't think before moving, pity
there was no one there to correct him.

The marble clatters as percussion on the stereo,
as my mother's shoes as she marches through
the apartment, berating my father. Her tone
like when she scolds *We're late* from the elevator,
while I ask for my father's *bendición*
his blessing my breakfast on school mornings.

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His arms are folded over the pool
of dozens of linked rings of whiskey sweat. She is stern
faced,
whispering *esta es la última vez, the last
time, the last...* I am counting down minutes
to midnight, to promised explosions.

She leans beside him, reveals a secret.
He detonates quick Spanish syllables
Of scorn, of pleading regret. I don't understand
the suitcase she has placed beside the door,
his threat of jumping down from our balcony
drowning the countdown and the fireworks,
discarding shooting stars and fading night-lights
that echo from the windows.

Drunk, he was drunk, my mother explains
on the way to my grandmother's, my face buried
in her side. He apologized and conceded
as we left, though both kings still stood
like men of stone, immune to their queen's rebuff.

*Kevin Gonzáles*Lotería

In 1946 my grandfather won the first big lottery
drawn in Puerto Rico. *La primera lotería extraordinaria—*

my father recalled, as we shared my first beer
in a nowhere-bar. —*That’s why I’m a lousy father.*

I was fourteen. He was seven when the lottery hit.
I didn’t understand. The big lottery. *How big?*

I asked, nursing a bottle, green
as my grandfather’s luck. Green as all the bills

rolling from his hand half a century ago.
Big enough for a year long Europe tour

for a Cadillac and a mistress
for a beachfront condo for the mistress

for a Cuban gambling slant—he recited
like a child repeating a mother’s plaint.

They stayed home, him and my grandmother.
And my father’s gift, a dog named *Lotería*.

It was all he got, and it didn’t last long.
The mistress killed herself in the condo—

another story, saved for the next beer.
I learned from the worst, he said,

please be better than me. I promised
not to tell my mother about the beer,

unsavory hops guzzled with my father's grimace.
The death blow—*Lotería*, the bull terrier,

ran over by the Cadillac. Grandfather
behind the wheel, stuffed wallet pressed

against his ass. My father knelt
beside *Lotería*, his eyes fixed

on the fading lights of the car, the random
pulse of brake lights. Gone, it was gone.

Darin Jensen

Interview with Thomas Fox Averill

Thomas Fox Averill is the writer-in-residence and a professor of English at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, where he teaches courses in Kansas Literature and creative writing. His publications include a novel called *Secrets of the Tsil Café* (Penguin-Putnam, 2001), two short story collections, *Passes at the Moon* (Woodley Press, 1985) and *Seeing Mona Naked* (Watermark Press, 1989). His next novel, as yet untitled, is forthcoming from Penguin-Putnam in late 2002 or early 2003. He has been a radio commentator on KANU for twelve years and some of those commentaries are collected in *Oleander's Guide to Kansas: How You Know When You're Here* (Wichita Eagle Books, 1996). He is also the editor of *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-century Writers on the Sunflower State* (University Press of Kansas, 1990).

Thomas Fox Averill and I sat down at a table in his home in Topeka on a bright day in February. Over coffee and blueberry muffins we had a chance to talk about his work and the thoughts behind that work. Below is an excerpt from that conversation.

DJ: I was reading on the website that you had gone in and prepared dinner for your friends on your fiftieth birthday. You prepared dishes from your recent novel, *Secrets of the Tsil Café*: green chilé potato soup and the recipes didn't sound like Kansas food. I have this German Nebraska background, very meat and potatoes.

TFA: *In the Tsil Café*, the cook, Robert Hingler, refuses to cook with anything except ingredients that existed in the western hemisphere before Columbus. That makes it a pre-Columbian restaurant in its ingredients—it's an invented cuisine, an invented culture. No single culture would have combined yellow potatoes, green chilé, shaved turkey liver, and turkey broth. But all of those things were indigenous to the New World. So it's New World food cooked New Mexico style. Robert's goal is to introduce Kansas City to the taste of the Americas before Columbus and particularly to chilés: *Secrets of the Tsil Café* actually starts with a menu. The first thing you see in it is the menu. Then you get into the guts of the book, the copyright pages, the dedication pages. The menu serves in some way as a table of contents. There are twenty-six recipes printed in the book, most of them from that menu, though not all of them. There are also footnotes to many of the New World ingredients—if you're interested in the origins of maple as a sweetener, you can read the footnotes. It's sort of a multimedia book. (Laughs) You can read it, you can cook it.

DJ: What is the importance of food in your novel? You talk about pleasure; do you think it's a representation of pleasure? Food is important in a lot of novels, and poetry too. I wonder what is the connection between human and food.

TFA: In some ways, *The Tsil Cafe* was, if not easy to write, at least full of the many possibilities that presented themselves to me, because food is such a ubiquitous metaphor in language and in human life, from the land of milk and honey to mother's milk. Milk and honey are the only two foods that are naturally produced to be food; everything else is corrupted. We have to kill something to get it. Everything from that to the way food is involved with the sacred, with initiations, with death and funeral banquets, with contests and challenges, with sophistication and innocence. It's like the innocence of Adam and Eve before they ate the fruit of knowledge. It's

just so ubiquitous that you have to find which way you want to go. It's a rich metaphor for almost anything. Probably the only other subject that is so metaphorical is sex, and for the same reason. It involves all parts of the life cycle. It uses all the senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing.

DJ: You could even modify it, so there's just sex, food, and death. You could go that far, almost.

TFA: And, of course, sex and food are the only two things we really need to keep surviving as people. As his father Robert says to my narrator, Wes Hingler, "Everything else is just talk." Interesting talk, but it's just talk. I wanted to write a book that not only used food as a metaphor, because that's easy to do—the whole "you are what you eat"—but in which people's interactions were almost food-like. The characters are all in some way reminiscent of some food. The father's association with peppers. The mother's association with the pungencies of garlic and onions and cheeses. She's from an Old World background, so I've got the Old World as opposed to the New World. And Wes grows up between them. He becomes the tomato, because it moderates and enhances both the New World and the Old, and he moderates between and enhances two parents. The last section of the book is prefaced with this: "You have young traditions and old ones, New world and old, you are both a vegetable and a fruit, a goer-between worlds. You are various, negotiable, capable of thickening, a good base for sauces, a fine garnish for salads. You are bright as blood, big as a heart. You are sweet and acidic."

That is Wes's character as he becomes the one who goes between his parents and also becomes himself. I'm trying not to just use food as a metaphor. Wes is not just LIKE a tomato, he IS the tomato, this wonderful thing that nobody knows quite what it is—fruit or a vegetable, to be eaten raw or cooked.

DJ: How long did it take you to write this?

TFA: From the time I conceived it to the time I had a draft that my agent started showing around took about a year. But I had been researching those foods, and cooking with those foods, for years. I became interested in the foodstuffs of the New World in 1992—ten years ago—because that was the five-hundredth anniversary of the Columbus voyage. And everyone was celebrating Columbus. I thought, “The heck with him—he was a European who stumbled onto a very rich place.” And what’s left? They took all the gold, they ruined the pyramids, they don’t use the calendars, the religions are gone except for in very remote parts. But the food is everywhere. That centuries-long relationship people have with a grass in order to cultivate it into corn, is to me an amazing human interaction with the environment. And so many things that we eat now, that we take for granted, the Europeans had never seen before. They had never tasted avocado or pineapples or green beans or strawberries or chocolate or vanilla or peanuts or potatoes or tomatoes. So I’ve researched and cooked with New world ingredients for a time, and created my character, Robert Hingler, and his recipes over the years since 1992. I still have a section of the kitchen cabinet for my New World foods. Also during this time I wrote long letters to a food friend of mine. So, *Secrets of the Tsil Café* had a long germination. Also, I’ve written some short stories that have to do with food.

DJ: When you write, you have this amazing sense of place that I’ve discovered in other books, but I don’t know that there are other American books I’ve discovered this in. Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* has an amazing sense of place for India. What is it about place that is so important in your work? These stories in Kansas, there are amazing places in them. Something about that is very important in your work. I was just wondering what that is, or what is important about place to you?

TFA: It goes beyond setting, I think. The need in the fiction writer to create a setting is one thing. But the interplay in people between the mind and the environment interests me. I've been loyal to this particular place for a long time. Place moves from geography outside the mind to geography inside the brain. That's happened to me. Cartographers have studied the human ability to hold a place in their minds. For me, that place is Kansas, probably because of my long tenure here. Everywhere I look, or travel, I have a memory. When that happens, who you are becomes physically as well as mentally oriented. I feel that way about Kansas. And I know other people who seem to—like William Stafford in his poetry, and Steven Hind, a Kansas poet who writes a lot about the Flint Hills. These people can't separate experience from place. Or idea from place. Or history from place. Like one poem Stafford enjoyed reading aloud. "This is the hand," and he would hold up his hand. "This is the hand that touched the water," and he talks about being bitten by a muskrat, which may or may not have ever happened. But still, he was telling us how he carried around places and experiences in his physical self. That's the interplay I'm fascinated by, probably because I've been in a single place for so long, and read Kansas literature for a long time. I'm actually finding now that in the novels—for example, *The Tsil Café* is not so much geographically centered—but it, and my town of Glasgow, Kansas, certainly are fully created places, with all the attributes I'm talking about.

DJ: How would you define regional literature, then?

TFA: Regional literature is American Literature. Think of Hawthorne's obsession with the place, culture and history of Puritan New England. And he captures it well. When I read his work in high school and college, the place seemed abstract. But then I went back East, and visited all the places, including the Custom House, and the House of the Seven Gables. Hawthorne, Twain, Faulkner, Kate Chopin, Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe, Hemingway: all very

interested in place, and its effect on human perception, possibility, and so on. Now, regional literature seems to be anything not set in New York. But that's a more recent trend. It's all about population. In the late nineteenth century, 75% of Americans lived in the country, or in towns of less than 2,000. By the 1920s, a majority of Americans lived in urban areas. That's exactly when you see the propaganda wars begin. Sinclair Lewis, with *Main Street*, sounds the call, and all kinds of writers jump on the American small town, and the sterility and lack of culture in the heartland. Or, as happens these days, they romanticized the farm and the small town as the land of heart. Now, we are just a monstrous flat place, or a place for the country to be nostalgic about. Now, demographers tell us, 75% of all Americans live an hour's drive from a coast. They think Kansas is flat, and dull. But the ocean is just as flat as the prairie. Like I do, I suppose, those who live an hour's drive from the coast celebrate their landscape. There are just fewer of us in this landscape.

DJ: You do radio commentaries, too. How did you get started?

TFA: The radio station put out a call for Kansas Day commentaries. I had created the Oleander character for a possible book, and then I didn't do anything with that. But I had this voice, this old farmer who knew Kansas backward and forward, and who didn't always like the way things were going, culturally, and in the legislature and the education system. So I thought I could use this voice to comment on the state. KANU, at the University of Kansas, accepted one of them, and I said, "I can do some more of these". And they said, "Go ahead." And Mr. Oleander took off; I was doing commentaries about once a month for the first year. People really responded to them—I had more requests to come and speak—and more than from all my short stories. Four minutes on the radio beat out having a short story published in *Kansas Quarterly* or someplace. In terms of the Kansas thing, I guess if I have any agenda it's in my feeling that we've lost

some of our populist experimental selves, and bought into the negativity that surrounds us—in terms of popular culture. People don't know the rich history of the state, and all of the social experimentation, both positive and negative, and all of the wild people who came here, were attracted to it, because of the populist experimental mentality. My desire is to give some practical history lessons, and always to comment on the present in terms of the past. The Oleander character is able to do that. Plus, comment on the country versus the city, which mirrors the past versus the present; and farming versus industry, you know, agri-business versus agriculture. So I get all these nice contrasts going for me and when I get an idea and work it out, it may be something fairly simple, but it's something that only Oleander would think of, and nobody else would say.

DJ: And all of this is related to your interest in Kansas and its literature?

TFA: I've taught Kansas literature for years, I've written books set in Kansas for years, edited *What Kansas Means to Me*, I've done radio commentaries, I've written about Kansas, and I don't have any high claims for myself as someone who is altruistic, like, "This is what I want to do for Kansas." It's just what I'm interested in. I have had students tell me, and citizens of the state tell me, that the stuff that I do on the radio and in the classroom makes them feel better about being part of Kansas. And that makes me feel good.

DJ: Right.

TFA: I think it must be hard to live in a place that even you undervalue, in terms of almost everything about it. And I know people who do. They hate the food in the restaurants, they hate what they can't get in the grocery store, they hate the landscape, they hate the lack of movies or other culture, they hate the school systems, and I think, "That must be tough!"

DJ: Right. I teach Expository Writing, and it's a room full of fresh-faced, smart kids. It's amazing. I taught high school before this, and I can't believe the difference. But they're very introverted; they don't have a lot of confidence about them. Do you think that's a function of place, that they don't feel like they come from somewhere?

TFA: Yes. At Washburn we do a lot, especially in our Honors classes, that has to do with Kansas and place. A lot of our honors students are from small Kansas towns, and they've done very well in small Kansas high schools. And we want them to know right away that they have as good an education in as good a place as anywhere else in the country. They come to us as really bright, smart, articulate—as much as anyone from a big city high school.

DJ: Probably even more than a big city high school.

TFA: Maybe more. I do like to see their attitude about their place change, individual by individual. But I also got into Kansas literature because I was a graduate student, and I was looking for a specialty area to teach in, and in the late sixties and early seventies grad students were desperate for something to study. All of the people in the canon had been done ad nauseum. What more could you write in a dissertation on William Faulkner by 1970?

DJ: Or Hemingway, or Fitzgerald, or any of them.

TFA: Exactly. Also, people at that time were discovering new voices that hadn't been studied before, which included regional voices, included women's voices, included black voices. Everyone was trying to expand the canon.

DJ: That's interesting, because I'm on the other side of that, where there's too much to study. No grad student knows where to begin.

TFA: Yes, you used to sit at a table and there was meat and potatoes and green beans, and you would eat them up. Now, to be a grad student is like going to an international buffet. It's like, "Where do I want to study? I don't know." But back then, I was reading a lot of Kansas literature because I was writing about Kansas, and my creative writing professor, Edgar Wolfe at KU, said, "You have to read some of these Kansas writers." I didn't know who they were. He gave me their books, and I read people like William Allen White, Paul Wellman, and John Ise. I realized that no one was reading these people. There was something nice about entering territory that no one else had claimed. Within five or six years of reading and writing about it, and teaching it, if people had questions they would come to me. I became the person who knew about Kansas writers. I collected as much as I could and I read as much as I could, voraciously, for years, trying to get up to speed.

I read a lot of work that no one would read or even want to read, like the work of historical novelist Margaret Hill McCarter. Best-selling novelist, but her novels are very romantic, idealized visions. But she was a very prominent woman, educated. She was the first woman ever to address a Republican National Convention. So, a significant person, not just a novelist. But that leads you to wonder about the fact that lots of women were not considered great novelists. Part of it is because they were pushed into the genres like historical romance. But I read all of her work, and everything William Allen White ever wrote, his fiction, things like that, and I learned a lot. I wasn't interested in claiming that this was great literature, but in making the claim that it tells us a lot about the place we're from. About our idealizations and our romances about ourselves. These are McCarter's themes: Bleeding Kansas, and pioneering and the Santa Fe Trail and education—she took them all on.

Anyway, I think there's a real advantage to getting a territory and making it your own. William Stafford has a poem, "In Response to a Question." The first lines: "The earth says have a place, be what that place requires." Real

simple. Find your place, and do what you can in that place. What you have to do in that place. Early on, I chose Kansas literature, and it has been great. I've read a lot of fine books, and through the Center for Kansas Studies at Washburn I've reprinted books that were out of print, that people had no idea existed. I've been able to teach those in my classes. Every once in a while we've been able to "discover" someone. My wife, Jeffrey Ann Goudie, in fact, became interested in a woman columnist, Edythe Squier Draper, who had a literary career in Southeast Kansas. Jeffrey did a long biographical essay after researching Draper's life and reading all her work. I was interested because Draper was an incredible short story writer in the twenties and thirties, then quit writing fiction to become a newspaper columnist for the last years of her life. Here at Washburn, we've reprinted Jeffrey's article as an introduction to six of Draper's stories, and I think they're just as good as stories being produced at the time by Sherwood Anderson and others of that generation. Very innovative in their technique, very forward looking in their focus on women and children and others in powerless situations.

So there are a lot of rewards to Kansas Literature. Whether I have a big agenda or not, I don't know. I like to do things because the activity is engaging—like writing. I feel better when I'm writing. I feel better when I'm reading. And my interest in Kansas has allowed me to be more published than if I were writing on William Butler Yeats or Nathaniel Hawthorne. I'm the one willing research and write it. I always advise people to find something that nobody else has charted out.

Amanda Watson

Garlic Love

I cut garlic now, rather than buying a jar.
Such a mysterious bloom whose petals we eat
whose leaves form from within and become our paper.

The flower oils our fingers, the garlic claw makes
us bleed. It is a rose with which we can't make wine.

I love this lovely rose, who taught me patience, reserve.
I love cleaning up its messes, placing its papyrus in my
pocket.

When it's naked, alone in the world, only mine,
I heat it in water, coddle it, give great care
to my little gray love.

I love this lovely rose, who taught me desire, art of perfection.
Then quiet, self-speech, the methodical,
a hidden respect for preparation.

I want to love all my vegetables as this small lovely bloom.
Understand, they don't all command it the same.

Dennis C. Martin

Clean

*Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean:
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*

(Psalm 51:7)

Since Shawn Hardin had only three weeks left to serve on his tour of duty, his company commander told him he could spend his remaining time in the company area, cleaning weapons, filling sandbags, and shoring up the battered flack walls that surrounded the hooches. Returning from the mess hall with a large bag of sausages for the dogs, he decided to work outside on the walls in the morning and then come in to clean the weapons when the Vietnamese sun became insufferable.

Shawn turned toward the last hooch, planning to feed the dogs on his way. He knew where they would be. Alkie, the big female, and her constant companion, little blond-haired Smitty, would be found lying in the limited shade on the north side of the fourth hooch. A wooden box containing rat poison sat near the corner of the building.

“Chuot Chat Doc,” it read, spelled out in red letters on a yellow background. He laughed. It didn’t work. He had seen the rats gorging themselves on the white powder like it was buttered popcorn, and in the rainy season, when they were desperate, he’d even seen them eating the wooden boxes.

The dogs were where he thought they would be, and as he fed them the sausages, he sat in the sand talking softly to Alkie, telling her how much he was going to miss her.

“You’re one tough old girl,” he said. “I sure wish I could get you out of this hellhole.”

Alkie was the company dog, arguably the toughest dog on the Nha Trang airbase—and she certainly earned her keep. She was always sure money in a dogfight, but more importantly, she just loved to kill rats. Alkie was big and broad-shouldered with short caramel hair. Her neck was thick and she was powerful, and when she walked she strutted with a swaying stiff-legged gait.

He remembered one night during the monsoon season; a large rat had fallen from a beam crossing the middle of the hooch and landed on the floor, scurrying about until finally lodging itself behind a sheet of plywood nailed to the screening of the wall. The startled men jumped up on their bunks in a fright, grabbing their weapons, wanting to shoot at the rat until they realized the damage that a ricocheting round glancing off the concrete floor could do.

“No! Don’t shoot!” one soldier cried out. Finally, one of the men ran outside yelling, “Rat, Alkie, rat!” The door was held open. Alkie suddenly appeared out of the darkness, strutting wide-legged and wild-eyed with spittle already running from the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were bulging and searching, and she suddenly started whining loudly in a rising and falling wail. She could hear the rat crawling and tearing at the wood and screen. She knew it was trapped, but she couldn’t get to it. She started whining and wailing, higher and higher in frustration, and when the rat heard her cries, it started clawing and scraping about in a panicked frenzy.

The men, still standing on their bunks, started egging her on. “Rat, Alkie, rat...get him, Alkie, get him!” they screamed. Alkie started rearing up, whining, and clawing at the piece of plywood, trying to pull it off the wall. Suddenly, she leaped up, sinking her upper canines into the top edge of the wood, and in one swift motion, she jerked her massive head and body backwards, wrenching the plywood from the wall. It crashed to the ground with a swift thud, and Alkie was on the rat in an instant, biting it right across its big body. She shook it three times; each time crushing shut her muscular jaws. Then she turned toward the men with the rat in her mouth

to proudly display her handiwork. Dark blood and milky fluids oozed from the rat's wounds and dripped from the sides of Alkie's mouth. One man after another cried out in disgust—"Oh, God!"—"Oh, shit!"—"Get it out of here, Alkie...get it out!"

One soldier, standing like a stork on the end bunk, pushed open the back screen door with the end of his M-16, and Alkie pranced out into the night with her prize, trailing a stream of guts and blood across the concrete floor.

"Ah, Christ," another soldier said, "I can smell that already."

As the nauseating odor started rising from the floor, one man after another recoiled from the stench.

"Hell, let's sleep outside," Shawn said. He and the other men gathered up their bedding and poncho liners, climbed up on the flack walls, and then stepped onto the tin roof of the hootch. They settled in, wrapping themselves up like mummies from head to toe so the ever-present swooping bats wouldn't land in their hair, and went to sleep in the lightly falling rain. All through the night, the fresh, wet drops of rain fell softly on his face. Shawn didn't mind the rain. It made him feel clean.



Yes, he'd miss old Alkie, he told himself. He left the dogs and walked on toward the last company hootch, which bordered the medic's row of hootches. Just as he started nailing the flack walls, he saw his medic friend Howie pull up in a jeep on the backside of the hootch.

"Howie, what's goin' on?" Shawn yelled as his friend approached.

Howie went tearing into his hootch crying out, "Where's my camera! Where's my damn camera when I need it! Shawn! Shawn!" Howie called out from inside. "You've got to come with me! You've got to see this! You're not gonna believe it!" Howie came flying out of his hooch, sliding the strap of his Nikon over his head. "Put that

stuff down, come on!” Howie demanded, grabbing Shawn by the arm pulling him toward the jeep. “I’m going to show you the strangest thing you’ve ever seen in your life!”

“What is it?” Shawn asked.

“Oh, no. You’ve got to see this with your own eyes.”

They jumped into the jeep and went whirring down the orange dirt road toward the dispensary. Shawn’s curiosity began piquing quickly, because he could see that Howie, who was not usually excitable, was worked up to a fevered pitch over whatever it was.

Howie pulled the jeep up next to the back door of the dispensary, placed his finger to his lips to indicate silence, and motioned to Shawn to follow him. Moving down the empty hall, they opened the first door on the left, and Howie, then Shawn, entered. Both men stood still as their eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. At first Howie was blocking Shawn’s view, but as Howie moved to the end of a large bed to adjust the focus on his camera, Shawn beheld a remarkable sight. In front of him on a wide gurney lay a Montagnard with his muscular arms resting by his side and his short legs spread open.

“We put him out,” Howie whispered.

As Howie began taking pictures, the flash of the camera acted like a strobe light, giving periodic illumination to the scene. Shawn could see bottles hanging off the bed and two tubes running into the man’s arm. He moved closer, seeing better with each flash of Howie’s camera. From his head to his crotch the man looked normal, but where his testicles should have been, a big bulbous sack of dark wrinkled skin now existed. It ran down well below the man’s knees, rose above the height of his thighs and covered all the area between his widely spread legs. Both men stood silently looking on in amazement, gazing at the pulpy mass. After a few moments, Howie moved to the door, tugging the back of Shawn’s fatigue shirt as he went by. Both men left the room as quietly as they had entered. Driving away, they said nothing at first. It was Howie who eventually broke the silence.

"What'd I tell you? Is that the strangest thing you've ever seen?"

"What the hell is it?" Shawn asked.

"It's called elephantiasis," Howie said.

"What causes it?"

"An infection from parasitic worms."

"*Worms* made his skin thicken and grow like that?"

"That's right," Howie said.

"It *did* look like elephant skin. How'd he get here?"

"The ROKs heard about him from some Montagnards up in the highlands. They found him laid out in his hut and wanted to help him, so they called us for a medevac. We brought him in a few hours ago."

"What happens now?" Shawn asked. "What are they going to do to him?"

Howie pulled the jeep to a stop, turned toward Shawn, and said, "Cut it off."

"Cut it off!"

"That's right. That's all they can do, now. It's gone way too far. It's that or he'll die."

"The poor bastard," Shawn said, as he stepped from the jeep, shaking his head in disbelief. Howie drove away, throwing up a swirling cloud of red dirt behind him.

Shawn had been nailing the wooden slats back on the flack walls for only a short period of time before he stood up and leaned back into the wall. Clusters of sand burrs stuck to his sleeve. He carefully pried one after another free from his arm, working unconsciously, lost in his thoughts. He was thinking about the Montagnard—and about going back to that world called home. He unconsciously dropped the hammer in the sand, then turned and started walking down the road back toward the dispensary. He had something that needed to be taken care of. He needed to see Howie.

Trucks and jeeps, belching nauseous black smoke, passed him in both directions. He pressed on, stepping over shallow holes and gullies of oil and diesel fuel. The air tasted like creosote as the acrid scent of napalm drifted over from the airstrip. It crawled up into his sinuses, stinging and burning. The smell swirled in the air in a

fight for dominance with the disgusting stench of rotting fish heads. The villagers that lived near the perimeter were cooking with nuc mahm, that pungent oil born of fish decay and fermentation. He wondered if he would ever get that rancid taste out of his sinuses or if he would carry that foul scent imbedded in his skin and the cells of his mucous membranes forever.

He slowed his pace as he approached the long white building of the dispensary. To the left, a road ran a short distance to the side gate of the airbase. The Siclo girls were there already. Their black silk slacks and colorful red and yellow aoi dais stood out starkly against the white walls of the guard shack. Their perfume wafted seductively in the air, and from under the colorful umbrellas that they held up against the midday sun, their dark luring eyes tempted and invited.

“Stay away from the pretty ones,” his friends had warned him when he first arrived in country: “They all have the clap.”

He turned away from the scene at the gate and closed the short distance to the medics’ building. “Howie’s good with a needle,” he kept telling himself. “Howie’ll take care of everything,” he kept saying out loud. “Home’s only three weeks away,” he kept repeating. And he thought, and he thought, and he worried.

He was worried sick about going home. He was worrying about the whores, the Siclo girls, and the jungle. Lately he had been having dreams about Becky, his girlfriend back home. He kept remembering that summer day at the quarry when they made love for hours in a sleeping bag and how they walked naked, hand in hand, to the rock edge and jumped into the cool green water. He kept remembering how he hung on to a rock outcropping while she wrapped her legs and arms around him and clung to him as he kept them both afloat. He kept remembering how fresh and cool and clean they felt dangling there.

He entered the building, walked down the hall, and turned into Howie's small office. "Howie, you alone?" he called.

"Yeah, come on in—close the door," Howie answered.

Shawn sat in a chair next to a big metal desk. Howie stood gazing out the window at the gate and the Siclo girls while carefully putting vials of medicine into a wall rack.

"Look at those girls," Howie said. "GIs bring them in here to get shots for the clap, and boom—three weeks later, they've got it again."

Shawn said nothing, but looked over at the wall rack with all the vials.

"Christ! It's amazing we don't flat run out of penicillin," Howie continued, pointing out the window. "Some of those girls out there have chancroids...most have the clap...why, some even have syphilis. God, I can't wait to get out of this filthy country."

"Howie, that's why I came back up here to see you. We're both leaving here in a couple of weeks, and I'm worried as hell about going home."

"Worried about what?" Howie asked.

"Look, I don't want to take any diseases back to the States. I don't even want to think that it's a possibility." Shawn kept eyeing the hundreds of vials in the rack on the wall.

"You're probably all right," Howie said. "You're probably already clean. I've pumped enough penicillin in you this last year to clean out a water buffalo."

"Maybe so, but I want to be sure. I want to be certain," Shawn said, his eyes transfixed on the rack of vials.

"Howie is there some kind of super shot that will kill everything?"

"Well..." Howie hesitated for a moment. "Ampicillin is pretty strong. It'll damn near kill anything. But it's a

nasty, painful shot. I've had people get sick, pass out, and have bad reactions to it."

Shawn gazed at the rack of vials again, running his fingers across his lips in contemplation. He looked down at the floor and closed his eyes. He could almost see the streets that ran down to the water in his hometown. He could almost smell the balmy spring freshness of Lake Erie blowing inland on the northwest wind. He slowly opened his eyes as if awakening from a dream.

"I want the shot, Howie," he said. There was a tone of pleading in his voice. "I don't care about the pain. I need to be sure. Do it as a last favor for me."

Howie told him not to look at the needle. Shawn leaned over the large gray metal desk, with his pants around his thighs, holding a big metal wastebasket in his hands. He felt the needle go in...and in...and in. He felt a sensation of mass as the fluid was pumping into him, a feeling as if a baseball was being forced inside his left buttock. A hot flash ran up through him to his head. Sweat poured from him as he sagged, forcing his head into the wastebasket, gagging and heaving. He collapsed on the desk, fighting for consciousness. He felt Howie's hand on his back, and from somewhere distant he heard his voice saying, "Hold on, Shawn...not much longer." The needle felt even longer coming out. His breaths turned into short gasps. Soon, Howie had cold, wet towels on him and was pouring cold water on his head and neck.



He had been a mess, sprawled over that big desk, throwing up into a cold metal wastebasket. But it was over now. He felt much better. His mind was at ease. He knew he was clean.



He left the dispensary, favoring one hip, and turned away from the road to the gate, intending instead to go the back way to the company area, hoping for some fresher air. He was locked in his thoughts as he neared the outside perimeter and the fickle wind shifted, carrying toward him the sickening rankness of rotting flesh from the shallow graves of a Vietnamese cemetery. His tongue curled up in the back of his throat and his eyes squinted shut. He gagged, put his hand over his mouth, and quickly moved on. As he walked, he kept thinking about the last year, replaying it like a bad dream that would not end, with scenes turning over again and again in his mind.

There was something happening to him, something he couldn't fully comprehend. He wanted to leave—yet he really didn't want to go. And he couldn't stop thinking. He thought about the dogfights, and he thought about the Siclo girls. He thought about the young kids playing with a lizard amidst the dirt and barbed wire. And he thought about the poor Montagnard with the elephantine balls. He thought about the rats and the bats. He thought about the first time he saw that woman dressed in black silk pants squatting on the side of the busy road, pulling her crotch flap to the side and pissing a single yellow jet of water into the orange dirt. He thought about how he knew at that moment that he had entered a whole new world—a world that would change him forever. He thought about himself, and he was worried. He thought about where he was going in three weeks, and he thought he just might be more afraid about going home than he was about coming over here to begin with. And he thought about his neighborhood with the neat houses and trim lawns and clean streets with curbs. And he thought about the street-cleaning machine with its big brushes and its jetting streams of water. And he thought about his house that his mother kept immaculate. And he thought about Becky. And he thought about Becky, and how she would be coming through the front door of his house to see him again very—very—soon. And he thought about Becky, about the fresh, clean, smell of her.



He entered the company area. The dogs were still lying in the partial shade. No one was about. He walked toward the latrine as if pulled by an undertow. He stopped at the door, untied his boots, and took them off. He slipped off his socks, shed his shirt, pants, and underwear, and stood there dark-skinned and naked in the sweltering Indochina sun. He absently let his clothes drop in the sand.

As he entered the latrine, he kept saying to himself, over and over: “Home is only three weeks away...home is only three weeks away.” He needed to take a shower. He needed to take a shower. He wanted to feel the cool, fresh water washing over him. He wanted to feel—clean.

Tiffany Kentile

Crow

Caaw caaw

on a telephone wire, thirty feet up
a scavenger, loud and burdened with lice
looks down on me. I'm forged in God's image,
yet the foul feathered one looks down on me.
Oh, to have hollow bones! I tolerate
your laughter for quite sometime, while I stand
slouching, crushed by my anchor--gravity.

Caaw caaw

Tania Beltran

No Santa Claus In Kansas

While I look at that picture of me on Christmas Eve fourteen years ago, I feel cold all over again. Looking through photo albums can make you feel, smell, and even taste memories. I was seven years old and not even trying to smile in the picture. It looks like I have a twitch on a corner of my lip, probably because the dress I was wearing was bright blue and white and very ugly. Perhaps what made it much more ugly to me was that it was Christmas Eve and there were five inches of snow on the ground. The Kansas winter of 1987 did not kindly welcome a family of three Central Americans escaping a civil war in El Salvador.

When we left El Salvador in the summer of 1985, I did not fully understand why we had to move so suddenly, why we had to leave everything that was familiar to us. I knew about the war, I remembered how on occasions helicopters would fly over our home and soldiers would sometimes gather on the corners of our street. Sometimes I would be afraid, but only because others spoke of what had happened the week before in some other neighborhood. It was often the custom of guerrillas to invade nice neighborhoods and take refuge in civilian homes. At that time, there was no violence around our neighborhood, but my parents did not want to wait for the violence to reach us, so they decided that we would leave the country.

Moving to the United States was very hard for my parents, and taking jobs as janitors was something they had never expected to go to college for. In El Salvador, my dad was a senior accountant at Toshiba, and my mother was an accountant for a large company too. The language barrier did not allow my parents to make very much money in the first few years that we were in the United States. So that very cold Christmas of 1987, there were no

Christmas presents under our funny little plastic tree that had one string of lights.

In El Salvador, Christmas Eve is the day when you wear your best dress. Children spend all day prancing up and down their neighborhood so that their little friends can see their new outfits. But that particular Christmas Eve in Kansas would not allow it. I wasn't planning on prancing up and down my neighborhood; there wasn't even a child or anyone in sight. The temperature was below freezing and dreaming of a White Christmas had turned into a nightmare.

I was actually dreaming of a warm Christmas, where the sun did not drench, but lightly scattered in all the right places. A warm Christmas where there were children singing Jingle Bells in Spanish and then more kids at the red-tapered fireworks stand. In El Salvador you see screaming children waving their money (colones and not dollars), yelling out what fireworks they wanted. Every Christmas season one's hearing is impaired in El Salvador. The salsa music from every house is really a contest to see who can be the loudest and the most festive. Like the speed limit in El Salvador, it seems that the regulations on fireworks are made to be ignored. The fireworks are so large and so loud, that you are sure to wake someone from their siesta a mile away.

Instead, I was in Wichita, Kansas, where it was quiet and cold. The snow piled up silently on our doorsteps. Snow was no longer as fascinating as it once had been to me. I wanted to be able to go outside and see an ocean and a palm tree. I wanted to see my grandma, play with my neighbor, speak in Spanish, and not have to strain my tongue to hide an accent. At school I had learned that, here, kids did not open their presents on the midnight of Christmas Eve. Nor did they have their family Christmas Dinner at that time. How could a kid wait all night to open presents in the morning?

In El Salvador, the Santa Claus fantasy is strictly taught to children, and parents attempt to keep that belief for as long as possible. That snowy night, I was sure that Santa Claus had just skipped our town because it was

much too cold. My parents had to tell me that Santa Claus was not real and that neither he nor they could bring me presents. At first I didn't want to believe it; I was tired of everything changing and being so different.

When I think about that Christmas Eve now, I believe that it helped me grow up in many ways. I had to finally face all the changes in my life; I had been trying to live El Salvador in Kansas. But at seven, all I could see was the snow, lots of snow and no Santa Claus, no loud fireworks, and no salsa music.

Erin Billing

In a Beijing Taxi

Are you *airen*?
The driver grinned
in the mirror
to see us shrug and squirm
under the weighty name
of "lovers."

You, nervous and hopeful, glanced
at me, a swift, secret
sideways step of the eyes
I couldn't match.

Dirty red cars raced beside us
coughing clouds of murky
metal-toned exhaust. I turned and
squinted against the smoke
and late afternoon sun, squinted

to see the slow
steady feet of the man
who has been riding that bike
in the same narrow dusty gutter
for years.

Danielle K. Little

Neo-Nubian Blues

We had finally reached that stage where I could rummage through his hidden spaces without him looking askance. We happily prepared for the day ahead: Marc furiously brushing and flossing, me busily looking for the t-shirt he wished to be placed on the bed, both of us trying to finalize our dinner plans. I opened the second drawer down and stood there, uncharacteristically silent.

"They're called yarmulkes," Marc explained, the pride in his voice curling smugly about the room.

"I *know* what they are," I snapped. "Why in the world do you have three of them?"

"You need them for all the major events, D-. Weddings, bar mitzvahs, high holy. . ."

"But," I interrupted, "they give them to you at the door. There is no need to own your own, especially since you're not even . . . Like I said, they're at the door."

"Why would anyone want to wear a used one?" he asked, using that voice I hated, the one that crept through the air whenever he thought I had totally missed the point. Like that time I asked him about his wine rack; it was filled with bottles that had names he could not pronounce and brands he had never tasted before. He vehemently insisted that such accoutrements were necessary, especially when his colleagues came by, and it wasn't until I forced him to share a bottle of Mondavi reserve with me, my favorite California red, that he finally believed my claims that wine need not be French to be enjoyable.

"Look, D-," Marc excitedly carried on, "I had this one custom-made. Yeah. Wearing a used one is just shady."

I stared into his cinnamon-brown eyes and took a deep breath. The night before, we had taken a long walk through Prospect Park and stared at the moon. She was waning. We talked about the ideal wedding: no white tuxedos but simple,

elegant black (both); soul food (me) or a buffet of Japanese, Italian and kosher stations (him); whether the announcement should be in *Jet Magazine* (only me) as well as the *New York Times* (both). Looking into the drawer, I realized that the conversation would prove to be purely academic.

"I'm going to take a shower now," I said. "I'll be ready in a few."

"Don't rush, sweetheart," Marc said, kissing me more passionately than I expected as I had yet to brush my own teeth. "We've got plenty of time."

"Yeah, sure," I said, and closed the drawer behind me.

Christina Joy Palangattil

Watermelon

They carved him out of her—
after nine months of waiting,
he was too big: head swollen
with water.

I'd watched her stomach grow
into a melon: smooth curves,
and heavy bulge. Inside, curled up
with the seeds, I knew he slept.

In the week after the carving,
they took no pictures.
They were too busy keeping
mother and baby alive.

I didn't know—I only saw
rosy feet, and teardrop toes.
I knew he was beautiful,
all soft, and pink, and juicy.

When they told us,
it was the first time
I saw my daddy cry.
There are no pictures—

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