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spring 2006

touchstone

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

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TOUCHSTONE is published by the College of Arts and Sciences at Kansas State University with assistance from the KSU Creative Writing Faculty, the KSU Fine Arts Council, and the KSU English Department.

TOUCHSTONE invites submissions of poetry and prose (with SASE) from students enrolled in college or university writing programs. Contributor's payment is two copies.

Send submissions or inquires to:

TOUCHSTONE

Kansas State University
English/Counseling Services
Bldg.

Manhattan, KS 66506

touchstoneksu@hotmail.com

Single copy price: \$5

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Printed by Kansas State

University Printing Services,
Manhattan, KS

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no. 38
2006
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EDITOR'S NOTE

dennis etzel jr.

I am honored to present this year's **TOUCHSTONE**, which features amazing work from up-and-coming writers, not only from Kansas State University, but from The University of Kansas, Indiana University—Bloomington, Kent State University, and Bennington College, to name a few universities.

There are several debates around what makes good writing, and several books claim to lay out rules for writing, whether for stories or poems. Even as it is important to learn the “rules of writing,” each piece of work seems to set its own rules, too. It is up to the writer to decide what an initial piece of writing is trying to “say,” to see if a certain traditional form is needed, or if an experimental form would help in that certain work. The writing itself leads the writer to revision, making the best decisions for that work, to sometimes even see how the form and the context can meet.

The work in this year's **TOUCHSTONE** is no exception. This year's award winners are great examples for both traditional and innovative forms and contexts, sometimes having subjects about decision itself. Aisha Sharif chose a traditional form for her poem, “Under Veils,” which is a ghazal, an Arabic form of couplets that uses the same word to end each couplet. In Robert Hinderliter's “Living, At Least,” a man in bereavement makes a secret decision for one night. Stacy Platnico's story “Daylight Saving” is an innovative story-in-the-making form. Jen Kocher's “Dirtbags” describes a decision made in the summer. Lucas Millican's decision to combine fact and statistics with personal experience and humor fits the form of “Left-Handed Scissors.” And Miranda Pultz uses a sectioned poem for three images, as if portraits, in “Home Economics: Education of a Young Girl.” These are amazing works, in which these summaries do not do the works justice. Luckily, you have them in your possession for reading, along with the other stories and poems within this lit mag.

I am also happy to include Teresa Johnson's amazing artwork, as she explores topics of women's issues in her work. My thanks go to Teresa for allowing Touchstone to include her artwork. There is also an interview with United State Poet Laureate Ted Kooser, to parallel his visit to Kansas State University. He has started a project called American Life In Poetry (www.americanlifeinpoetry.org), which features poems with brief introductions by Mr. Kooser that newspapers can use as a free service, where they would otherwise have to pay. He has also won the Pulitzer Prize for his book *Delights and Shadows*. My sincere thanks goes to Mr. Kooser for his time and visit.

My personal thanks to Imad Rahman (the faculty advisor), Elizabeth Dodd, Susan Jackson Rodgers, Jonathan Holden, the KSU Fine Arts Council, and the KSU English Department for their support and encouragement. A thousand thanks!

And thank you to all of those who submitted. It was a difficult and challenging process, to determine what would be included in this year's magazine. I wish we could have included all of the fine work we received.

Finally, thank you for reading.

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I would feel the tissue
in my left breast crack,
like someone was pulling apart
a peeled orange.
I would move my body
so whatever was wrong would pop
back into place.
Doctors say some women
are more prone to cysts.

*You just have to wait
until they come.*

After surgery, they bandaged my breast
with white cotton patches.
The pressure of the tape stretched my skin
like over-inflated balloons.
I pulled back the sticky cloth to see stitches,
railroad tracks whose grooves sunk deep.

I feared the day I would uncover
the markings to a lover.
He would frown
at the wrinkled skin around my nipple.

A year later, the cyst reappeared.
They had to dig further,
push aside all the scar tissue.
I could feel the doctor tug
as she threaded the needle through the old wound.
Sometimes the scar tissue burns,
like it's slicing through the weight
of my breast. Other times, it throbs, tired
from just bubbling up a new knot
that sits anxious against the wall.

At 17, Sister Agnes left her lover for the veil.
His touch still lingers. Her habit is of no avail.

Please, no more of your poems. My love—
a shadow, autumn's red veiling.

Nathan dreams of a hijabi¹. Her hair pours
rum in his hands, drunkenness unveiled.

A man's touch is smoothly twisted – hair
around a finger. When hijabis love, they love in veils.

Kiss the dip of my collar bone. My father
will not see. It is night beneath this veil.

God, place your hands above my eyes. Lower
my gaze. Don't let me see through your veil.

A'ishah tasted Qur'an on the Prophet's breath.
When she exhaled, Arabic crawled across her veil.

¹a Muslim woman who wears *hijab*,
the Islamic head scarf

The shelves
have quietly
gathered a layer
of dust; I hear
the leaving of geese
through the open
screen and wipe
a cloth along
the grain.

I re-arrange the pots
in my cupboard
and those
along my walkway
that hold dirt
and the roots
of geraniums.

Pinning clothes
along the line, I pause
to watch the falling
of leaves; the summer
windsock streams
limply down
the side
of the house.

He's lighting matches one after another, letting the flame crawl up to his fingertips before shaking it out and lighting another match. The ashtray is full of little black curls. He's dressed nicely and has a handsome face, or maybe used to have a handsome face; he's right at the age where the distinction between the two becomes blurred. His name is Henry, and he's looking out the window, lighting matches, and whispering to himself. The window is open and the smoke drifts toward it. "This is what I wanted," he says, breathing the words into the smoke.

Outside the window, it's night and the city is gray and red. It had rained during the day and the streets are still wet, tires hissing on the pavement below. In the hotel room, a television sits in front of a big bed and copies of Monet paintings decorate the walls.

He's here, in this town, in this hotel room, sitting by the window for two reasons. The first is that his father has just died, and the second is that his wife is in the process of dying. It's late, but she had been awake when he called her, or at least said she had been awake. He told her that the service was nice, that he'd be home tomorrow, that he loved her, things to that effect. He spoke softly on the phone. He always speaks softly to his wife, who has been given one year to live. He had spoken softly to her the night before when he told her to go to bed.

ooo

"You need your rest, Mary," he said. "I have a few more things I need to do before I call it a night. I'm getting up early tomorrow, and I want to be all ready to go so I don't wake you."

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" she asked. She ran her hand through her thin brown hair. "It's only a five hour drive, I can handle it. I've been feeling pretty good lately, you know."

"No, honey," he said. "It wouldn't be good for you. It would be too stressful. All those sad people thinking about—well, you know. You just stay here and rest. I'll be back the day after tomorrow."

“Henry...” she said, looking at him. “I know you don’t think that I—” But he leaned in quickly and kissed her. She tried to open her mouth for the kiss, but he pulled back and smiled gently at her, his hand on the small of her back, then turned to the closet and began shuffling through the clothes. She stood there for a moment, then turned and walked toward the bed. He glanced back at her as she was walking away, letting his eyes rest on her thin shoulder blades. Then he turned back to the closet.

ooo

It’s not like everyone hadn’t seen it coming. The old man was eighty-two, had lived past the point where he could get any joy out of living. He had died a slow, businesslike death, one which Henry had tried, except for a few phone calls, to keep his distance from. He had loved his father, of course, and for the most part had always gotten along with him, but they had never been particularly close.

At the funeral, he sat by the rest of his family: his sister and his aunt. They were both crying softly, and Henry was a little embarrassed for them. He had actually written something, a little speech, just a few kind words, really, but when the preacher asked if anyone had something they would like to say, he stayed in his seat. What would be the point? The old man was dead, wasn’t he? So there was a minute of silence in the little church, the only sounds coming from people shifting uncomfortably in their seats or the little snuffles of his sister and aunt as they looked down at their hands folded in their laps.

After the service, he exchanged a few words with his family, then headed back to his hotel, which was within walking distance. On the way back, still wearing his suit, he passed by a little bar and decided to stop in for a drink. The sun was going down. The bartender glanced at Henry’s suit, but didn’t say anything. He ordered a beer and looked across the bar at a woman a few years younger than him, sitting on the bar stool with her legs crossed, wearing a short black skirt. She turned her head toward

him and he looked away. He drank his beer quickly and ordered another, then leaned forward on the bar and looked into his glass. It had been fifteen years since he'd been to a funeral. That had been his mother's, and it had been a bigger affair than his father's funeral. She had been an elegant, popular lady with lots of friends, and—

"Hi, there."

He looked up. It was the woman from across the bar. Up close, he realized she was about his age. She had on a lot of makeup. She was wearing a tight red top with her black skirt and had a nice figure. He nodded at her.

"You're looking a little blue," she said. "Do you want some company?"

He looked at her for a second. "Sit down," he said. She smiled at him and sat down.

"What are you all dressed up for?" she asked. She had a lazy, gentle voice. She was smiling, but her eyes looked tired.

He looked back into his glass. "I'm just coming from a party." He blew into the foam on the top of his beer. "A business party."

"Oh?" She scooted her chair closer to his. "What sort of business are you in?"

He looked up at her. She really wasn't very attractive. "It's really not important," he said. "I really don't want to talk about it."

"All right," she said, her smile fading. She looked up at the bartender, who was on the other side of the bar, arranging some bottles. She lowered her voice. "Listen, I thought you looked lonely. If you want to, we can go back to my place, it's just around the corner. It won't cost you much. If not, I don't want to waste my time."

He met her eyes. He had known, hadn't he? Yes, he had known. He glanced up and saw the bartender still on the other side of the bar, wip-

ing the counter and looking disinterested. He looked at the woman, at her body and her tired eyes.

“Okay,” he said.

ooo

Up the stairs in the dark. There had been a light switch, but she hadn't even tried to flip it. Maybe the bulb was burned out, or maybe she knew her way around well enough not to need the light. Halfway up the staircase, she turned to her left and unlocked a door. Inside, she turned on a lamp, casting a pale light over the small room. There was very little furniture or decorations, and Henry wondered if she lived here or just used the place for business.

There was a large bed in the corner, and she took off her shoes and sat down on it, looking at Henry. He took off his shoes and jacket and sat down beside her. She didn't look too bad in the dim light. She was probably something to look at when she was younger, he thought. He smiled at her and tugged at her shirt. She stood up and took it off, along with her bra and underwear. She sat down next to Henry and leaned against him.

“Do you want me to take the skirt off or leave it on?” she asked, cooing the words, her lips touching his ear. “Some guys...”

“That's okay,” he said. “Take it off.” His throat was dry. She stood up and pulled down the skirt, and as she did he saw a crude scar on her lower abdomen. She saw him looking at it, and sat down beside him again.

“That was a little present from my second baby,” she said. “It was the only way she was getting out.” Henry was still staring at the scar, and she reached down and ran her finger along it. “Her name was Toshia. I haven't seen her in eight years. I think she moved down to Memphis to be closer to her—”

“Please,” Henry said. “I don't want to hear about your family.” He stood

up. "I need to use the bathroom. Is that it?" He nodded toward a half open door.

"That's it," she said, not looking at him. She lay back on the bed, her hands over the scar on her abdomen, looking up at the ceiling.

In the bathroom, he turned on the faucet and splashed water on his face. Christ, he thought. What am I doing here? Well, this is what you wanted, isn't it? This is why you told Mary to stay at home, so you could do something like this. Isn't that right? You know she could've made the trip. She's been feeling good lately, like she said. God, one more year. One more year and she'll be gone and you can screw anyone you want to, go anywhere you want to. Will that make you happy? Just one more year. Is that really such a long time? You've been unfaithful before, but for God's sake, you've been married thirteen years. Why can't you be faithful for the last year? For *her* last year? That would mean something, wouldn't it? Plus, she'll know. She always seems to know, somehow. Oh, she never comes out and says it, but you can tell. She understands why, though, doesn't she? And she forgives me, I'm sure of it. She knows that it's not my fault, she understands that with her I just can't...just can't do it anymore. Not when I know that she's... God knows, I love her, it isn't that. I should just walk out of here, then, shouldn't I? That would mean something. It would make a difference, wouldn't it? Yes, that would mean something. He turned off the faucet, dried his face on the hand towel, and walked back into the bedroom.

He looked at the woman lying on the bed. Her hands were still on her abdomen, her eyes closed. He walked over to the bed and looked down at her. He watched her chest move up and down. Yes, but this woman is alive, he thought. She's...living, at least. He stood there for a minute, looking down at her, wondering if she was awake. He undid his belt and took off his pants. He climbed onto the bed and she opened her eyes, watched him. He was still wearing his shirt and his socks. She smiled wearily and he crawled on top of her. He pressed his body against hers,

his chest flat against her chest, letting his body rise and fall with her breathing. He could feel her heartbeat. He closed his eyes and listened to the sounds she was making, moving up and down with every breath she took. He kept his eyes closed.

ooo

He'll drive home tomorrow morning. He'll drive home to his wife, and he'll hug her and kiss her on her forehead and tell her he loves her. And he won't be lying. He'll do all of that. He'll do all of that tomorrow. But now he's sitting by the window, watching the shadows from the matches flicker across the room. Looking out at the city, lighting little fires in the dark.

ooo

The nurse asks us to leave in broken English.
To the kitchen for guava duff and Bustelo.
We talk the slowing of vital signs,
how my grandmother first saw him at the park
in 1950, all the “old Conchs” calling
Chulo, Chulo, use that knuckleball...
It killed the batter’s chances. Every time
they made love they made a girl. Six of them.

I tell them what I’ve been knowing
for years: how I found him once
with a group of men
on the corner of White and Truman
having their afternoon cafés.
They wore sunglasses and guayaberas like mafia,
twirled cigars like braids of dark hair,
they danced, arms around each other,
faces so close beard glanced beard.
I saw him kiss another man deeply.

We drink coffee. Pastry flakes on the terrazzo,
their lips. My grandmother,
my aunts don’t go back to him.
They never saw the sun move
behind thick clouds, how his face darkened,
how he shadowed away from me, from the southernmost
tip of Florida to sea, to the Sierra Maestra,
beyond the whole Caribbean,
beyond everything weakly implied or known for sure.

I burned down the city to show her light
my heart was a lamp pumping kerosene
the city flowered, a rose in the night
I burned down the city to show her light
She turned to me eyes wide orange and bright
struck a match and doused me with gasoline
I burned down the city to show her light
My heart was a lamp pumping kerosene.

Sister Bernadette.

I will never forget that name as long as I live. Nor will my knuckles, which repeatedly bore the brunt of the wooden ruler she used as punishment for even the most minor infractions. I mean, how much trouble could a child in the second grade possibly create? Especially a child as angelic as I was. OK, perhaps not angelic, but certainly not deserving of the torture she delivered on a daily basis. You see, in Sister Bernadette's eyes, I was a demon child destined to purgatory. And, what had I done to deserve this horrible destiny? Baptism... well, actually, a lack thereof.

My parents were a pair of agnostic, hippy college professors who didn't feel right imposing any sort of religious beliefs upon their children. Better to wait until they were old enough to make their own choices. No, not better. Not in Sister Bernadette's eyes. And, certainly not in God's eyes. To the nun, I still harbored the original sin, dating back to Adam and Eve. For only those who had been baptized were absolved of this dreadful sin. And, might I add that after 13 years of the finest Catholic education, I still cannot tell you what that original sin was. Guess that's why I'm still on a one-way train to purgatory. I think it had something to do with an apple and a serpent. Whatever it was, I'm sure it was Eve's fault. It's always the woman's fault... especially if she's naked and holding an apple.

Sister Bernadette took great pleasure in reminding me of this inferiority every time an opportunity presented itself. She would simply curl up her tiny, wrinkled fingers and go straight for the jugular.

When a teary-eyed classmate shared the story of how her baby brother had died shortly after birth, Sister Bernadette gently asked if the infant had been baptized before he passed away. Upon learning that the priest had, indeed, baptized the sick baby and administered last rites, the evil nun smiled sweetly at the young girl and assured her that her baby brother was in heaven watching over her. Her smile quickly turned to

stone as she shifted her gaze directly toward me and said in a menacing tone, “Luckily, her baby brother was baptized before he passed away... otherwise he would have ended up where, children?” In unison, my classmates uttered the most disgusting word in the Catholic vernacular – “Purgatory!” Maybe I was just being paranoid, but I could have sworn they were all looking directly at me when they uttered that dirty word.

A few months later, it became time to prepare for the holy sacrament of First Communion. Being the opportunistic bitch that she was, Sister Bernadette took great glee in making me feel like an outsider under the guise of being inclusive. All of the other little girls looked like beautiful princesses in their ornate white veils with delicate embroidery, tiny pearls and silky satin. Lest I feel excluded, Sister Bernadette was kind enough to make a veil for me. It consisted of a dingy white sweatband with a scraggly white dishrag tucked underneath in the back. When I looked in the mirror, I thought I looked exactly like one of the Three Wise Men. A cheap version at that. Facing my classmates in this ridiculous getup was completely and utterly humiliating.

When it came time to practice the art of receiving the Communion, Sister Bernadette graciously allowed me to don my turban and line up with the other students. As each child approached her with his or her hands cupped to receive Communion, she would hold up the round wafer and say, “The body of Christ.” Once the child uttered “Amen” the nun would place the wafer into his or her tiny hands. This makeshift assembly line would continue in a fluid motion until I found myself standing in front of Sister Bernadette.

At this point, she would sigh and place the Communion server on her desk in a manner which suggested that I had caused a burden as great as the one suffered by Christ himself. She then pulled out a loaf of Wonder bread and used her liver-spotted fingers to tear off a piece and squish it into a flat lump of dough. This was placed into my hands without any mention of Christ, for that would be a sin nearly as grave as not being baptized.

As I ate the piece of bread still bearing her fingerprints, I had mixed emotions. I recognized that the act was designed to point out that I was different from my classmates. But, I also enjoyed being able to have a taste, no matter how small, of the forbidden fruit. You see, my mother was one of those health-food hippies who did not allow her children to consume those things which practically defined childhood – Oreo cookies, potato chips, soda pop and... the worst offender of all... Wonder bread. So, like Pavlov's dog, I would practically sit up and beg for more humiliation as long as it resulted in my getting a nibble of the soft, chemical-laden Wonder bread.

But one day, Sister Bernadette crossed the line.

As I stood in front of her, practically salivating into my cupped hands, she had the audacity to pull out a plastic bag containing a loaf of whole grain wheat bread. And, it wasn't even the somewhat tolerable soft kind that was made specifically to trick kids into thinking it was just like white bread, only slightly darker in color. No... this was identical to the chunky, stale kind my mom brought home from the health-food co-op. Not only did it have the taste and consistency of a cardboard box, but it also required a huge glass of soy milk to avert the obvious choking hazard it presented.

That's when it hit me. This was all part of the nun's master plan to rid her sacred classroom of the blonde-haired demon harboring the original sin. If I choked on a lump of whole grain wheat bread, it wouldn't look suspicious. In fact, she'd come out smelling like a rosary.

Next to my obituary, which would of course mention that I was now in purgatory with the rest of the troubled souls, the newspaper would print a glowing story about how Sister Bernadette was simply trying to make one of her non-Catholic students feel included. The article would gain so much attention that Sister Bernadette would be flown to the Vatican to be anointed sainthood by Pope John Paul II. This, of course, would lead to her esteemed role as the "Mother Theresa of America."

Meanwhile, I'd be stuck in purgatory, unable to exact my revenge by haunting the old biddy.

If I were to survive this horrible fate, I had to beat her at her own game. And, then it came to me. If I refused to swallow this chunk of whole grains, there was absolutely no possibility of choking to death. So, I gave my best performance and pretended to be clueless about her little plan. I placed the lump of bread into my mouth and turned to walk to my seat. With my back to Sister Bernadette, I discreetly spit out the seemingly innocuous murder weapon and placed it into the pocket of my uniform shorts.

That night, I placed the soggy piece of evidence in my dollhouse for safekeeping. I included a note detailing the nun's sneaky attempt on my life, just in case she managed to carry out her diabolic plan before summer vacation freed me from her torture chamber.

I then did the unthinkable. I got down on my knees and prayed.

"Dear God, it's me... Jessica. I know it's been a really long time since I've talked to you, but I need a favor... a big favor. You see, my second grade teacher tried to kill me today. I promise I'm not making this up. I swear. And, what makes it worse is that she's a nun. At least that's what she tells us. Anyway, I'm scared that she's gonna keep trying until I'm dead. So, I need your help. Make her go away, so she can't kill me. I don't care how you do it, just as long as she's gone. OK? Well, um, thanks. I mean, amen.... Oh wait! I almost forgot the most important part. If you get rid of her, I promise to get baptized even though my parents say I'm not old enough yet. OK, that's it. Amen."

The next morning, I jumped out of bed without the usual prodding from my mother. I could not wait to go to school to see if God had answered my prayers.

He hadn't.

The old biddy was seated at her desk as I pranced into the classroom. I stopped dead in my tracks. How could this be? It just didn't make sense. My whole life, I was told by my teachers that if I prayed hard enough, my prayers would be answered. Well, where was God when I really needed him?

Then an idea popped into my head. Maybe I just hadn't prayed hard enough?

So began a daily routine where I would pray each night and then rush to school the next day to see if God had rewarded me for my unfaltering faith. But, the ancient nun didn't go anywhere. In fact, the only person who seemed to notice my efforts was my mother. It soon became apparent that she was growing increasingly concerned that I might actually be on my way to becoming a Catholic... or, even worse, a nun! But she knew my weakness and felt no shame in exploiting it to quickly quell any such aspirations.

You see, before I could even walk, I had developed an obsession with shoes that would later result in a collection that now rivals the closet of Imelda Marcos. But, even as a child, I was not content with just any old shoes. They had to be beautiful and extravagant. The flashier the better. So, one day after school, my mom took me shopping for my latest fantasy shoes... sparkly red shoes like the ones Dorothy wore in *The Wizard of Oz*. As soon as I placed them on my feet, my mother casually mentioned that it was such a shame that nuns were not allowed to wear such beautiful shoes. And, just to make sure she got her point across, she then added that it was an absolute crime that they were forced to wear those hideous black orthopedic shoes.

So, did I 'fess up and tell her I had no intentions of becoming a nun? Of course not! There was no way I was going to risk having to return those sparkly red shoes that looked absolutely amazing with my Gloria Vanderbilt jeans. Instead, I just smiled and acted genuinely surprised to learn that nuns couldn't dress like tarts. I was manipulating the situa-

tion, but she had set the precedent by preying on my weakness.

That night, I took care to make sure my prayers were said with discretion. It made sense to refrain from praying in front of my mom from this point forward... or at least until I fancied another pair of shoes.

As I waited for Sister Bernadette to arrive to class the next morning, I sat at my desk, clicked my sparkly red heels together and recited over and over, "There's no place like home. There's no place like home." As superficial as it sounds, those magical shoes had temporarily caused me to forget about my vendetta against the nun.

So, you can imagine my surprise when the principal walked into the classroom with tears streaming down her face. She asked all of us to quiet down, so she could share some terrible news with us. At this point, I turned my attention from the shoes to the principal. I could not believe it! God had finally answered my prayers! Those Catholics were right all along. God really did reward his faithful followers, even those who still harbored the original sin.

At that joyous moment, I decided that I was definitely going to become a Catholic. I began to daydream about my First Communion ceremony.... I would go against tradition and wear a beautiful red, sequined veil to match my sparkly new shoes. And, I would petition the church to replace the antiquated Communion wafer with the newly chic Wonder bread. And, not just a little piece, but a whole slice.

As I started to make a mental list of all the other things I would change about the Catholic Church, the principal uttered something that still haunts me to this day.

"Unfortunately, boys and girls, Sister Louise passed away last night."

Wait a minute? Who is Sister Louise?

"Sister Louise was Sister Bernadette's mentor at the convent. She was like a mother to her. Her death came as quite a shock to all of us, but

Sister Bernadette was particularly affected due to their close relationship. We all feel as if she was taken much too early.”

Much too early? I didn’t get it. I mean, Sister Bernadette was like a gazillion years old. How old was this Sister Louise lady?

The principal then assured us that we had nothing to worry about, because Sister Bernadette would be back in class the following week. I’m sure she continued to say something else, but I heard nothing. I was emotionally traumatized. Scarred for life. Back on the purgatory highway.

I remained silent for the rest of the day. I ate nothing. I sat by myself during recess. And, I walked home with my head held low. I felt awful. I just wanted to go up to my room to be alone with my thoughts.

After picking at my dinner, I sulked up the stairs and changed into my pajamas. As I had done each and every night for the past few months, I dropped to my knees next to my bed and prayed.

“Dear God. You killed the wrong nun.”

ooo

It's memoir to me
The thought of eating eggs benedict
I oblige
If only I could
But you're my teacher
Pushing me
Developing my inner soul
On the edge
Like a creased paper
Without you
Stay focused
We'll have our time later
Now,
Will you win the race?
Are the words spoken?
Your dialect
I expand
Nurturing it into my own
Admiring the shape of your legs
When you walk away
Dolce Gabbana surrounds your attitude
Ralph Lauren is your esteem
I love it
Yours truly, Fashion.

SOPHIA¹

rebecca lauren

**“AND PRAY IN THE SPIRIT ON ALL
OCCASIONS...” EPHESIANS 6:18**

**“AND WHEN YOU PRAY, DO NOT BE LIKE
THE HYPOCRITES...” MATTHEW 6:5**

Our Father	at every birth of a king
we are most blessed	we scream
of tent-dwelling women	Our Father
when men ask for water	we rescue babies
we give them milk	from rivers
and drive a tent peg	but we will not dance
through their skulls	on the tables of kings
or shave their heads	to bend their ears
Our Father	men who pierce our noses
who makes us one	like pigs when we draw water
we wash your feet	find us beautiful
with our hair	Our Father
we shoveled your shit	when there were five of us
from our ark	your ancestors
Our Father	we would seduce your chosen rulers
rock the temple tables	serve their heads on a platter
for we are the pigeons and doves	four prostitutes
that flap against the cage	in your wisdom

¹In the Hebrew biblical tradition,
Sophia means wisdom; the holy
spirit; the creative force

Our Father
when we spun around
to find where you had gone
you turned on us
with brimstone
we are the sellers
of purple cloth
Our Father
we married men
for their wheat fields
men who lie about
tithes and taxes
at times we become Salome
and no one believes
in what we've seen
Our Father
when we are alone in the desert
all you offer
is a dry cracked voice
in the arid sand
we sit on donkeys
refuse to get up
because we bleed
Our Father
you name our sons "Laughter"
and name our wombs "Pain"

we birthed the messiah
ask your sisters how
we bow our heads
before men in the square
ask your mother
of breasts so heavy
they runneth over with milk
how can you be the one
we pray to
Our Father
how to follow
if we must be called Daughter
if we must rise with the sun
in the baking of household bread
do not sleep on
as we knead and pray
we want to hear
the pad of your feet
across a dirt floor
Our Father
when the torn kitchen curtains
are caught up in the first breeze
of morning
you find flour
on the windowsill
in all our empty jars

**WE BURY OUR DEAD
ON A HILL**

m. cameron larson

"It's a damn shame," Seth muttered as we congregated around his table. We all nodded in agreement, some of us adding an Amen or a Right On. Seth had been out south of town trapping coyotes when he found him. The desiccated body of the priest was still in the back of Seth's Ford, the women and children outside stared at the truck, not daring to look over the lip of the bed.

Time wasn't something measured on a clock in Rio Cabello. We lived by the sun and the moon. When the sun rose, we rose. The roosters made sure. We ate when we were hungry and slept when we were tired. The morning sun burned through the early clouds and the blue sky was washed out by its brilliance. White light was reflected by the corrugated metal roofs atop mud shacks. Old adobe walls were baked hard in this sun, no rain could wash them down. Not that the rains had come this year. Storm clouds would build out of the west, the clean smell of wet creosote flowers would drive the promise of a cool shower into your soul. Your desire would be dashed as the curtain of rain evaporated before it reached the ground. It had been drier than anyone had ever remembered, even Añjeo, who most of us thought must be at least a hundred years old had never seen this desert so brown, so dead.

"Just a God Damned shame."

All the men of Rio Cabello were assembled in the schoolhouse that doubled as our church. We didn't have the law here, the closest marshal would probably be in Albuquerque, maybe as far as Santa Fe. As far as we were concerned there was no need for the law, we had always taken care of our own business, and we were happier left alone. We used to have a telegraph when the train came through, but that had been forty years ago. Esteban Sifuentes used to have a telephone, but although he was a Spaniard and therefore better than the rest of us, he still couldn't afford to pay the bill. His black heavy plastic telephone occupied a chair on his front porch and the children would make imagined calls to the president and Jesus Cristo Rey for answers to their prayers. As with

all concerns in our town we would have to put this one to rest ourselves.

"So what do we do with him, Seth?" one of us asked again.

"Gotta bury him. Can't leave him in my truck. I got alfalfa to bring in before winter. Spent too much time haulin' his carcass in to town."

ooo

Carlos, Huero, and I filtered out of the schoolhouse with the men of the village. Old men were comforting their old women in the street. Seth scattered the curious children from his truck with a look. Dust billowed from under his truck as he sped out into the desert.

"What do you think happened?" Carlos asked.

"He didn't look like he was surprised. He looked almost excited," Huero said.

"Tonto. Excited. What are you saying?"

"There's something different in his eyes. He lives out in that desert alone. He hasn't been the same since his Mama and Papa," Huero looked to the ground. He was too polite to speak of the dead, even to his brothers.

"Chingao, he probably killed his parents. He lives out there with La Doña del Rio. He eats her children with her," Carlos said laughing.

"Now he got hungry again, and the priest ended up in the pot."

"Aye, chingas," I said. "He wouldn't have done anything to the priest. That old man took him into his house after he, you know."

We should have spent the morning working in the fields, Papa would be angry. But the event drove us to loiter in town, to listen to the people talk. Some went on like nothing unusual had happened. Others wept openly at the foot of the cross in front of our church. Women whispered of demons that came out of the moonlit desert. Men talked of

wolves or mountain lions. I didn't believe any of these. He probably fell off a rock and broke his hip. And he was old. The heat in the desert could kill a healthy man. The priest left on his pilgrimage every year. He would live in a cave in the desert for forty nights. He would return withered and smelling, proclaiming visions of prosperity, wealth and salvation. There would be a feast celebrating his return. Rio Cabello would breathe a sigh of relief.

We walked to the little store at the edge of town for a bottle of Coke and to steal some beers. The store was the only red brick building in the town. It used to be a train depot. It used to be a way out of here. Faded letters on a cracked wooden sign looked out on rusted tracks that led into the desert. The sign read, "R O CABE O." No one had bothered to take the sign down. No one had bothered to repair it either. We knew where we were. Alejandro Carmona had taken the depot after the trains stopped. He claimed it by the right that his father had been a conductor, and therefore it belonged to him. No one argued, his claim made sense and those red bricks got so hot inside no one else wanted it.

"Mijos, vienen, come here. Where have you been? Have you heard what happened? Terrible. Just so awful." Alejandro Carmona heaved his fat body off a tiny wooden stool on the porch. He reached out for his cane, the thin wood bent like a bow under his weight. He wobbled down the brick steps, a sweat forming on his upper lip as he struggled toward us. "When is the funeral? Have you dug his grave in sanctified ground?"

"No," I said, "no one has told us, the priest was the one who would do that before." Carlos and Huero walked into the store to buy Cokes and steal the beer. I always kept Alejandro occupied during our heists.

"Come here to me Diego. There is something you must know."

I approached and swollen red fingers wrapped around the back of my neck. His puffy lips brushed my ears as he spoke.

"Diego." The smell of his breath made me hold mine. "Seth has some-

thing to do with all of this. Before he left to kill the coyotes he came in here. He was asking me about the priest. If I had seen him. If I knew why he had left into the desert.”

“He went there to pray, he does every year...”

“Everyone knows that, Seth should know that better than anyone.”

“What should I know, Gordo?” Seth said, appearing from inside the store.

My muscles tensed, I hadn’t heard anyone coming. He had come from nowhere. My heart beat in my throat.

“You should know that there is no worse sin than to kill one of the savior’s shepards. Whoever has done this has committed the worst crime,” Alejandro said. “Fat man, you know worse.” Seth’s eyes looked to me, suggesting something I didn’t understand. Alejandro stiffened and pulled away from me.

“Diego. You and your brothers have another hole to dig. I will bury that priest tonight.” Seth turned and walked away on the tracks. He called out as he walked away, “Señior Carmona, mind your store. Seems that any thief could walk away with it.” I watched him as the heat rising from the sand contorted his image into something not quite human, something out of a bad dream.

Carlos and Huero had to pull me away from the store and back to our house. Seth had always appeared in my dreams. His angular face and black eyes shrouded by slanted lids looked at me from every dark shadow. Seth had always been too perfect. All the boys of Rio Cabello hated and admired him. The men looked up to him, though he was young. The priest had said he was wise beyond his years, and that he was blessed. The priest revealed that when Seth had been born a vision had been granted to him. Seth would bring a change to Rio Cabello. Seth would finally bring our little colonia what it deserved.

I spent the rest of the day looking for spare wood to build a box for the old priest. I wandered around behind houses while dogs barked and snarled at me. I had never spent much time in the church schoolhouse. Papa and Mama didn't think much of school or The Lord, neither of them put much food on the table. We had a little field where we planted beans, and in the fall after we harvested what we could, we all would load up into the flatbed southbound to Hatch or Las Cruces to pick cotton, chilies, lettuce, whatever would pay. I liked picking cabbage the best, there was something in the leaves that would numb your fingers and make your mind wander. Not like cotton or chilies. The bolls of the cotton would split the toughest hands, and you couldn't touch your eyes or privates for a week without them burning if you picked the chilies.

I had gone through the entire town without finding enough spare wood for even a cross. I thought about the old priest and how even though me and my brothers never appeared in church, whenever the priest would see us in the street he would call to us, "Diego, Carlos, Huero, vienen aqui, I want to talk to you." We would stand in front of him in a line, and answer questions about how our mother and father were, and he would tell us how he missed seeing our faces, and how Jesus Salvador missed us too. We told him we were sorry, but our Papa wanted us to work. Huero would lie to him and say that we all prayed to Jesus every night. Carlos would start praying right there on the spot asking Jesus to make us rich so we wouldn't have to work on Sunday when all the other kids got to dress up and wear shoes, sit in the church for an hour, eat barbacoa, and then get to play the rest of the day. I would stand silently and think about purgatory. My friends told me that because I didn't pray and give money to Jesus, he would send me to purgatory and devils would pour burning lead down my throat for one thousand years. Sometimes that thought still kept me up at night. Maybe if I could find a box to put this priest in he would vouch for me to Jesus. Tell him that I wasn't so bad. Just a poor boy from a poor family that had to work for

everything in his life. But it looked like purgatory for me, we might have to dump him in a hole, sans box. In Rio Cabello there was desert sand, there were mountains, and there were cacti. But no trees. And no wood.

ooo

We sat in the arroyo in the heat of the day, sharing the shade and warm beer with the ants and a rattlesnake that wedged himself into a crevice between two rocks in the little canyon wall. Carlos would spit his beer at that old rattler and its rattle would get buzzin' in our ears to where we couldn't tell the difference between it and the buzz from the beer. We had worked hours to dig a hole for the old priest. The sand in the graveyard made for hard digging. For every shovelful you pulled out of the ground, a half shovelful would slide back in and take its place. Finding an empty spot wasn't easy either, none of the graves had stones, and the little wooden crosses didn't last too long in the sun. And it was hot. So hot the ground burned your feet if you stood in one place for too long.

Huero looked sick on his beer. Huero was so light skinned he burned like a fish in the sun. Seth called him Vampiro, and would affix his index fingers together in a flesh and bone Crucifix to ward off my poor undead brother. Seth had always bullied Huero. He was quiet, reflective, and kind. Seth was none of these. I thought that Seth must hate Huero, he was everything that Seth couldn't be.

"What kind of name is Seth?" Carlos asked as if he knew what I was thinking.

"It's from the bible." I thought a bit. "I think he said it was the name of Adam and Eve's third son."

"I always thought it sounded evil, like the name of a brujo or a devil." Carlos spouted forefinger horns and wagged his tongue in and out of his mouth. We all laughed. Huero began to cough as he laughed, gasping and choking. His face was getting redder and his hands flew to his

throat. Carlos repeatedly slapped his back and I yelled at him to cough louder and louder. After what seemed like five minutes of choking, Huero struggled to his feet. He wasn't gasping any more. No air was moving in or out of him. His face wasn't red anymore either. It was a deep purple and his eyes were poking too far out of his sockets.

"Chingale, fucking do something!" Carlos screamed at me. I stood up, and just stared.

"What's going on, fellas?" Seth's voice came from above us; his black outline blotted out the burning sun.

Carlos yelled, "He's dying! Help! Please, help us!"

Seth jumped off the ten-foot wall of the arroyo to the dry sand stream bed. His black leather boots drove into the soft sugar sand. He wasn't wearing a shirt and his dark smooth skin gleamed in the sun from his sweat. "What's a matter, Vampiro? You get a hold of some holy water in that beer can?"

"Stop fucking around, Seth. He's dying," Carlos said, "Take him to your truck, we have to get him to town. Now."

"Town. Too bad the priest is dead."

Huero fell to his knees. Carlos ran toward him, but Seth got between them. Seth reached down to Huero and picked him up with one hand, Huero's body was limp. We stepped back from Seth. We had never seen such strength. Seth sneered at us. He brought Huero's face close to his ear. "There's nothing wrong with him," he turned his face to Huero, they were almost kissing. Seth whispered, "Wake up."

With those two words Huero's eyes popped open and air exploded into his lungs. Seth dropped him into the sand, turned, and started to climb back up the wall of the arroyo. "Dig. He's stinking up my truck." We looked up at him, huddled around our resurrected brother. We had

always feared Seth. Papa had told us never to be with him. The rest of the village adored him, worshipped him. Girls would follow behind him as he strutted down the street. Men would ask him about his truck, and how could afford such luxury. The boys would kick their balls at him and beg him to play. And he was the old priest's favorite. The priest took him in after our Papa had found him lying in the bed of his parents. Papa had first heard the buzzing of the flies when he made his discovery. He said it sounded like a machine. Pulsing louder, then almost silent, then reawakened by a gust of wind. Papa would whisper the rest of the story, huddling us together in a tight circle behind our house.

"Mijos, I knew what the sound of the flies meant. I hadn't seen Seth's Mama or Papa since he was born, for almost four years. They had not come into town, not even for their own mothers' funerals. He was covered in flies. Just looking at me. They were dead long enough to stink. And he was just sitting there, looking at me with those cold eyes. Not crying, not begging for food or water, nothing. That boy will bring ruin to all he touches."

We knew Seth would kill us all. Something had happened to him out in that desert. Something had happened with him and that priest. And we knew we were next.

ooo

We had dug graves before. When we were big enough to lift a shovel, Papa brought us with him and we helped. Now he was older and we did this ourselves. We had dug for aunts and uncles, grandmothers, sons, brothers and mothers. We had dug graves for our friends. We knew some day we would dig for Mama and Papa. Somehow we never realized we would be digging a hole for the old priest. He was a part of us all, like the sun, or the coyotes in the desert. We looked to him like we looked to the rain. And like the rain he was gone.

"See, I told you he was evil," Carlos said. He hadn't stopped babbling

since Seth drove off with the corpse. His shovel came down on my foot time after time. I held my tongue and dug. Massive stones blocked our work and roots from unknown plants snaked thick through the dry, packed sand as if the desert would refuse to accept the priest's body.

Carlos looked red, his eyes bloodshot, tears streaming down his cheeks. "We are digging our own graves, ese, that's what we're doing. We should get the hell out of here, we can leave, he would never find us."

"Callate, puto," I snapped. "Dig."

Huero slept the sleep of a perfect dreamer under the shade of a rock. I looked to him as I worked, straining my eyes to see that he was still breathing, looking for the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. I knew he needed help, I didn't know how to help him.

The sun slid down into the Robledo Mountains, staining the western sky a majestic purple. We had never noticed how fast El Sol flew through the sky. Always before we couldn't wait for the night and its cool desert air. If we prayed, we would have prayed for the heavens to stand still, to delay the end of this day. But we didn't pray. We mined through the bones of our ancestors, not caring that we disturbed their peace.

Finally there was a hole. We looked up at the deepening azure above us. We could hear wailing of women and the clang of the church bell carried on the evening wind. It was time.

We looked down the hill at the procession slithering its way up the hill toward us. The black-clad women were crossing themselves and clasping their hands high above their heads as if they could reach into heaven. The men wore their best white shirts and bolo ties to bear the body of the old priest. The corpse was parked on a litter thrown together from two long metal poles and an old green blanket. It was wrapped tightly in what looked like the maroon-flowered curtains from Esteban Sifuentes' windows. We recognized two of our friends, altar boys, balancing the life-sized, peach-flesh painted, crucified Savior, on a cross. The painted

blue eyes of the Savior watched the leader of this procession with a look of agony, head tossed to the right as if he wished he could pull his gaze away. It was Seth draped in a hooded brown robe, swinging a burning censor in one hand, and holding a clear glass chalice high in the other. A garishly painted santo was drowning upside down in the chalice. Seth was chanting something, it sounded like church words but we couldn't be sure.

The sun had almost positioned itself for night behind the mountains when the march came to an end. The altar boys propped the crucifix up into its hole. The Lamb of God swayed above us, horrified. Seth finished his chant.

ooo

"Throw him in," Seth commanded. The men shuffled to the edge of the pit, and the maroon-swaddled body slid down into the darkness. Seth tossed the chalice, with the water, and santo down into the hole we had dug. The people of Rio Cabello stood silent. We looked to Seth.

He pulled the hood off his head. He smiled an ugly smile at Carlos and me. He whispered, his voice barely audible above the sound of the night, "Go home."

Again we obeyed. The altar boys left the crucifix where it stood, the plaster body of Christ would stay where it was hung. Wordlessly we walked down the hill. Huero had not woken from his sleep, he never completely would. I carried him over my shoulder. Life would go on as it always had, mas o menos. We were still poor. Seth would ask about our mother and father, and ask if we prayed to that idol on the hill. We would lie and say we did. I would think about purgatory. And the people of Rio Cabello would take care of their own business.

ooo

I have a story to tell. It could be the story of a boy or a girl, a man or a woman. That's the best part of a story.... the whole not knowing part. It might take place today, or a long long time ago or at some space age date in the future. I haven't really decided yet.

And here you are...ready to take the journey with me. And good for you. It's going to be a great story. Full of love. Full of adventure. Full of suspense! Of incomplete sentences! Ah, yes, it will be a great, great story.

And do you know who's got a cameo in my story? Christopher fuckin' Walken. I really like him. He always plays the "weird guy." I like weird people. I was once told I was weird myself, but I didn't really believe it. Most people don't know what they're talking about. I'm not that weird. I'm not Christopher Walken weird.

So it's early one morning. It's almost five thirty in the AM, but really it's six thirty because daylight saving has just taken place, and you know how daylight saving can mess with people's minds. It's like a full moon or something. It's terribly disconcerting, daylight saving time. It's like birth. You're used to this warm, warm place that's kind of like your bed and then someone rips you from it an hour early. Okay, so it's like *pre-mature* birth. But you get my point.

Man, you see? This is already shaping up to be a great story! We've got an ordinary person in an extraordinary situation- that rock-your-world craziness of daylight saving time.

Do you know who else has a cameo in my story? Ardal fuckin' O'Hanlon. If you don't know who he is, my fellow Americans, you better ask somebody because he's about the coolest motherfucker on the planet. He's in my story. Oh, God, that makes me so happy that Ardal's in my story. He is more important than Christopher Walken, but I had to sneak Ardal in later, make you think it couldn't get any better than Christopher Walken and then POW! There's Ardal O'Hanlon, strolling

casually onto the scene.

So daylight saving time has just occurred, which makes the date a Sunday in early early April. The house is quiet with the newness of the change; the world is rubbing its sleep-filled eyes in the confusion. Many people will miss church today and blame it on the time change, but that's people for you. They don't go to church for the right reasons anymore anyway. I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Now, it's kind of scandalous, so bear with me, but it's something I know most definitely:

God does not take roll.

So I don't ever go to church. It doesn't really have anything to do with the time when I was little and went to church with my neighbors and they went to go put Christ's body in their mouths but told me to sit there alone on the pew because I wasn't worthy enough to take Christ's body in my mouth. It wasn't that. It wasn't that I sat there alone on that pew, looking around at all the religious paraphernalia and feeling the tears forcing their way into my eyes, like some mad drug bust, but it was tears instead of drug agents and they were seeking out sadness and not a crack house.

I don't want Ardal to play one of the tears/drug agents because it's not a very funny role. And Ardal is about the funniest guy alive and I want to give him a good, funny role. Maybe he can be in a supermarket. I have this vision sometimes of him in a supermarket. Only it's a weird supermarket, so maybe Christopher Walken can be the checkout guy or the store manager. It's weird because Ardal is standing in an aisle in the dead center of the market and for some reason there are fruit bins there, sharing the aisle with canned goods. Now everyone immediately can see the wrongness of this. Fruit is delicate. You do not want your fruit to exist in the same aisle as canned goods because you can only think of the horror that could ensue. One of those cans could get royally pissed off and go flying across the aisle at all that fragile fruit

and...oh, man...the horrific fruit stuff would just be everywhere. Their tender fruit flesh splattered everywhere, as even their canned cousins turn on them. And everyone knows that the fruit aisle is always to the far left or right of the store. The milk is still in the back, of course, because that's marketing for you.

So it's early April and the daytime saving has just occurred and it was blue outside, that beautiful early morning blue, slipping through the slats in the blinds, the kind of blue that makes you think you've beat the world to something. The kind of blue that makes you think you know something the world doesn't because you're up earlier and you're partaking in the ferocious beauty of it all. Meanwhile, they're still having some crappy dream, you know? Not even a good dream, but one of those dreams that are just like the subconscious housekeeper cleaning up. And it's a Mexican housekeeper, because we're being slightly stereotypical, and you've forgotten all your high school Spanish. She's telling you everything- why you're unhappy, why that blue is so god-damned beautiful- but it's all in Spanish and all that is gone. But it doesn't matter anyway, because your housekeeper is very poetic, she was a poet back in Mexico and uses very big and beautiful words.

So the lovely blue is there, but as the morning wears on, as it gets grossly near to the hours where other people start waking up, the blue begins to fade, in a kind of sad way, like you told on it or something. Like it was a lovely secret you shared but you went and whored it all around town and now everyone's waking up early and having a go and it's not yours anymore. So the morning becomes this kind of cold, bone white, like a skull. A skull that's turned into light and now it's seeping through the slat in the blinds. The kind of bone white that probably means that it will be cold today, or at least cloudy, at least kind of threaten rain. Or it might be sunny. There's always that chance. You might be an optimist.

So it's a bone white daylight saving morning in early April and it seems

as though everyone else in the house is still asleep. You like this. You like this because it's like you've got the house to yourself, and the silence of the house is only broken every so often by the birds outside. You think of getting up and chucking a rock at them, but then you remember the lovely blue and it calms you.

And while you're calmed by the memory, that vision of Ardal comes back. There he is in that supermarket, in the aisle that doesn't make sense. The delicate fruit, the harsh cans. And Christopher Walken is the store manager, but he hasn't come into the picture yet, but when he does, wearing one of those candy striped aprons, you just know Ardal will see him and, God can't you hear him, he'll say, "Ah, yes. So it's sort of a mad supermarket." I believe that Ardal has the most lovely voice in the world. And he's there in the aisle, maybe wearing a jumper, maybe wearing a jacket, but certainly not wearing a priest's outfit. For I know we all love him in a priest's outfit, but today Ardal is just Ardal, and that's about as lovely as a blue morning.

So the morning is bone white now and the house is silent and the birds have mercifully shut up and you're lying in your bed. It's a nice bed. You have three pillows and there is a down featherbed under the top sheet like a fluffy little secret and everything is warm and comfortable and you feel like the only person in the world. And you look very small and vulnerable in your bed, sinking into that featherbed, your head sinking into one of those soft pillows and maybe you take one of those three pillows and you place it over the top half of your face, not enough to smother yourself because you're not that sad yet, but enough to make the world dark again. Enough to make it feel like night. That wonderful feeling of night when rest is inevitable and seems long lasting and it's okay to end it to enjoy the blue morning but when the morning goes white you just want the dark back again. You want that time back. The knowledge that you're going to be okay for a while. That obligation, not to get up and face the day again, but the obligation to get some rest for God's sake, you've got dark circles under your eyes. And

you feel very heavy with the weight of everything and when you're walking around with no featherbed to cushion the weight of the push, you look even more vulnerable than you do when you're lying down.

And the pillow is over your head and the night comes back, but not in any true way, because you've already seen morning and it doesn't look very pretty. You're lying to yourself, but you close your eyes anyway and try to picture the most beautiful thing that you can.

And that's where you see Ardal. You don't know why he's in a supermarket of all places, I mean, why not in a lovely field filled with daisies? Why not cooking you a hearty breakfast in the kitchen? You don't know. But he's there in the fruit and canned food aisle and he's looking at the fruit. Maybe someone comes up to him and recognizes him and for a moment you are proud of your fellow American for recognizing foreign talent and they ask for an autograph. But the person has only an ink pen and so Ardal must sign an autograph on an apple, but then you think that American is dumb because now what will they do with that apple? Such a tempting fruit, is it not? They'll probably eat it, the fucking idiot, and waste that beautiful autograph.

But your vision is disturbed by someone waking in the house and opening their squeaky door. You hear B.'s bare feet shuffle down the hall. You hear the snap of the kitchen light switch. You hear it all because you don't have a room with a door because you stay in a living room. Not a real bedroom. And sometimes people aren't thinking while you're getting dressed and they just walk into this room and you have to throw your robe back on, but then they pretend like they don't even see you, like you're not even there. But the person opens the kitchen door and goes outside for a while and you can't really rest again yet because she's going to come back inside and shuffle around some more. Here she comes now, her bare feet making that peeling noise on the kitchen linoleum. You hear her rustle through a plastic bag from the store she went to yesterday. Looking for some tasty treat. There is the snap of

the light switch again and she seems to really take her time but she finally makes it to her bedroom and the door squeaks on its hinges and then closes and then you're safe again.

So you lay back down and you are on your way to Ardal Land when a second bedroom door creaks open and N. announces the time change (duh, where has she been?) and how she might decide to miss church due to a bout of diarrhea. You think that might be a little too much information, but begin to think about how your own bowels are feeling a little shifty at the moment, as they often do after a night of drinking. A night of drinking on an empty stomach. You're "supposed" to eat something but you're also "supposed" to get drunk. So choices have to be made, and you opted for the quick fix.

But N. goes and runs the bathwater anyway and you know that no more peace is coming this morning, because then the phone rings, not that you hear it really because there's no phone near you, but you've got a keen sense of hearing. And N. is still roaming the hall talking to doorways about missing church and diarrhea. Finally she returns to her room, however, because everyone in this house always does. Four separate, warring islands. But, hey! It's Ardal time!

So you close your eyes again. The supermarket appears. Ardal is still admiring the fruit, but he doesn't touch it or anything. That asshole with the apple is gone and there's just you watching Ardal in the odd center aisle and it seems as though the whole store is completely empty. Christopher Walken is in the back room, but the part of the store you're in is empty. And you really just want to watch Ardal for a while, watch him in that tender way you watch people when they don't know they're being watched. When there is something tragically innocent about their solitude, something so awfully perfect about their unawareness, so long as they don't pick their nose or butt, but Ardal doesn't do that here. He may do it elsewhere and you know what? I bet it's damn funny.

Though one may initially be inclined to think Ardal was there to pick

up some groceries, it becomes clear that he is waiting for something. Someone? And God damn it if that first door doesn't squeak open again. Damn, you know what this is like? It's like they're trying to throw off your concentration. It's like they know you woke up, or rather, were ripped from sleep by all these wonderful thoughts and they want to sabotage your "you" time, the bastards. No peace, I tell you. No peace at all. So you get up and creep to the kitchen, because you have the feeling that something is amiss, and you have the upper hand because you have no creaky door. In the kitchen, everything is as you left it, except that god-forsaken cat is sitting in the middle of your floor. That cat that shits in your room a lot, real smelly shit too, and you really like cats, but not this cat. Fuck this cat. So you creep back to your bed, and just in time too because that second door opens again and N. is out talking to hallways again. But she goes back and the heater turning off coincides with her retreat and now all is truly silent again.

You're ready to go back to the supermarket, but are troubled slightly by your bowels and bladder, both full of differing forms of that JD and Coke you drank last night. Last night was sure funny, though. It's funny how funny funny can be when you're all by yourself. You can get pretty creative with alcohol and anger.

By now however, it's 8 AM, the worst possible time ever created by creators and the whole morning feels as though it has gone to shit. 8 am ruins everything. It's symbolic of work, of school, of the starting time of everything you never wanted to do. For that, I will spend this entire eight o'clock hour doing nothing. Fuck you eight o'clock. Fuck you very much.

So you go back to Ardal. It gets easier and easier the more times that you go back because you become more and more familiar with the layout of Christopher's store, which is of course a mixture of many stores, but actually, no. It is most like the store where you first went grocery shopping on your own. That small grocery store down there across

from the gas station where your cousin used to work. But of course, their fruit is all the way to the left and here in your store, it is in the middle. And your store has something stocked that the one down the street would never have- some fresh Ardal O'Hanlon. No, that store would never be cool enough to have Ardal, but they're nice enough. I mean, you still have that receipt from when you took that lonely shopping voyage. And there goes another door. Can't tell if it's N. or B., but it doesn't matter. You kind of wonder whether it is B., and whether or not she will find what you left her. You've left little gifts in three places. Damn, you're really clever sometimes, you know?

So we could go back to Ardal, but we'd only be interrupted momentarily, so we'll put him off for now, and I know that pains you. It hurts me too. More and more that ugly feeling in your bowels reminds you more and more of your drink last night. How it made everything funny. And it's hard to make things funny that are so pathetic. And then you put some of your music on and you lip-synched in the mirror because you're really good at that. You know all the words and you do these really neat things to go along with it, like you're in a music video, which would be great. It would be great to be a professional lip syncher. You would be really good at it. But for now, you just do it to make yourself feel better, to entertain yourself. You especially like the sassy R and B songs. Look at you working it.

But there was that funny part where you took a break from the lip-synching. That was funniest. Well, second funniest. And you had that funny feeling when anger gets manic, gets crazy, needs, begs for hilarity? That feeling. So you crept on into the living room, giggling the whole time at the prospect of it. There in the living room, on the entertainment center, there on top...all the framed photos. Hey, there...B. has returned, though you didn't fully hear the door close. But she's definitely returned from outside. Maybe you should get back to the supermarket.

Ardal's still there. He's waiting for something. Maybe we need to get a little straighter what he's wearing though, because you've been thinking about this and even I've been thinking about this and it is a relevant point. Now, I'm not sure what you were thinking, but I thought Ardal was looking especially nice on Parkinson. He was wearing a black suit I believe. Oh my! I almost forgot something. We need to make it perfectly clear that you know Ardal is a married man, and while you think he's tops, you want him to be happy and married to his lovely wife, where together they raise their lovely baby. A lot of people would have trouble understanding the way you like people, the way you see people, because this is a highly sexual day and age. But you kind of missed that day at school, if you know what I mean. So, ah yes, do you see it? Ardal, by the fruit, breathes a subtle (so as not to hurt your feelings) sigh of relief. We dodged the bullet there, didn't we? Forgetting to mention your absence of sexuality. Gee whiz, where is your mind?

But there he is in his black suit that he wore on Parkinson, his hair that nifty, spiky mess (the best kind of hair). He is pretending to be very interested in the fruit, the way waiting people pretend to be very interested in something so that their solitude is somehow justified to passers-by. It's the focus that says, "I'm not being stood up. I'm very interested in this thing here." Often that thing is a small stain on your trouser leg or, in your case, a fingernail, or, in Ardal's case, a lovely array of fresh fruit. He is always somehow facing toward you (you're at the back of the store, by where the crackers and chips would be if it was really that store down the street) and he takes a step toward you every now and then while perusing the fruit. He is pacing himself in case you're late. A thorough fruit investigation. It's too bad Christopher Walken doesn't come out and strike up some small talk with him, you know, just so he's not lonely, but I bet Chris is too cool for small talk. Ardal too. Small talk is dumb.

You really want to get this all out, to let it all be free, but you're still bothered by Jack Daniels, and too lazy to take care of the situation, as it

were. For a while you might think it was not worth it, but then you think of the living room and the kitchen and it all seems okay. The top of the entertainment center looks a lot better anyway. You've brought some humor to an otherwise humorless environment. There was that graduation picture of you up there. Remember that one? High school graduation? You're wearing that cheap blue boa around you, like it's a Glamour Shot or something. Like you were getting ready for auditions instead of college. Much too serious. Besides, no one wants that picture of you up there anyway. No one here even likes you. So we have to make that funny. And boy did you! You got out the ink pens and a piece of paper and cut out a section about 5 by 7. Giggling the whole time! And then remember what you did? Your own artist's interpretation of your graduation photo. You gave yourself buckteeth instead of that somber "I'm graduating" look. You crossed your eyes too. Ha ha! Then you wrote "I Love You!" right there at the bottom and then stuck it back in the frame and put it back on the entertainment center! Oh how you did laugh! And it was funny, even without the alcohol. And it wasn't enough! So you grabbed the other picture of you and drew a brown cat and wrote "Our Dear Kitty." It doesn't look a thing like that damn shit machine cat. Ha ha!

It must be B. that is up now. Washing and washing in the kitchen. It's not a very M. thing to wake up before evening approaches and N. is probably back there with the Hershey Squirts, so it must be B., your favorite. Remember last night? Remember last night when she called you a bitch! Ha ha!

But we might as well get back to Ardal. For someone as anal about punctuality as you, I'm surprised you've kept him waiting this long. But I understand. I understand wanting to just watch him, watch him be him. Watch him the way you watch your mother when you want to tell her you love her so that she'll believe it, but you can't so you just watch her and keep those pictures as memories instead. It's all this watching, when people are still truly themselves, but also a blank slate in a sort of

way. Quiet and waiting to be created. So Ardal will stand there and you will watch him and think about how he is probably a really good daddy.

And now there is a funny silence in the kitchen because maybe B. has finally found the lovely gift you've left her. That lovely poem dedicated to being a bitch that you composed last night and she runs it off to N. with the diarrhea. Man, that was funny! Funny funny funny and how you laughed! That funny kind of funny that kind of leaves you with that even funnier empty feeling inside. And the poem has spawned quite a discussion!

So we go to that quiet supermarket. It's much more peaceful here and the scenery is nicer, with Ardal there in the lonely aisle. It should happen now. Maybe you approach him slowly, or maybe it's a crazed sort of run. I'm not sure. But he doesn't really see you coming but when you make it there, when you make it to him, in truly rare form, you slip your arms around him and embrace him. The top of your head comes to about his shoulder. His suit fabric and the smell of him are warm and masculine and maybe it intermingles with the fruit and it smells sweet. He has the innately firm muscles of a man, but there is also something soft about him. For a while he stands there kind of with his arms out, kind of perplexed. But he sees you mean no harm and maybe because you haven't offered him an apple and a Sharpie, he relaxes his arms, maybe even lets them fall gently around you and embrace you back. And maybe he gives you a little squeeze, or maybe he pats you on the head. Not like a dog, but more strokes your hair like someone would if you were crying. Maybe you are crying but he doesn't see. Maybe he says, "there, there now. It's okay." Maybe right here in an empty grocery aisle in this Irish embrace...maybe it's the warmest safest feeling you've ever had. It's almost like surrogate fatherhood, you there attached to him like that and he's not at all worried anymore. Perhaps he begins to find the whole thing a little endearing. And you begin to think you could just sleep there, fall asleep standing up like a horse (my lovely horse running through the fields), in this embryonic state. You

know that when you let go, everything will be the same, ugly way it was. Your family still won't love you much, you still won't have a father, your mother will still prefer her husband, but at least when you let go, you will have had this. It will suffice in a way. It will remind you that everything to do with men might be infinitely Oedipal, that awful dichotomous pulling, but right now it doesn't matter.

If you had it your way, this moment would never end. It wouldn't get old or stale. It would always be this new. But this supermarket isn't even real. You've merely retarded one you know. And Ardal isn't really there, just all that misplaced longing has resulted in his apparition here. And what a lovely apparition. You know you have to let go soon, that Ardal has other places to go, other people to see, other little girls to love. Because you're not really a little girl in the chronological sense anymore, are you? But that's all anyone sees. Because no one gets this close. No one gets to get this close. And when you look at chronology, you make assumptions. It's a reflex.

When you finally let go, you kind of walk away slowly, or maybe you kind of run in this mad way. I don't know. You don't show him your face because you have the kind of face people tire of easily. You disappear around the corner of the aisle. But then Christopher Walken appears in that striped apron next to Ardal. Ardal kind of says to him, as though he kind of understands now, "Ah, yes. So it's sort of a mad supermarket." But then he adds, "What was that about?" And Mr. Walken says, "Wow. I've never seen her do that before. You must be pretty special." And Ardal asks, "Who is she?" and Mr. Walken says, "I don't know her name. I'm not even quite sure what she looks like. No," he says contemplating, "couldn't pick her out of a line up. But she hangs around over there by the Rib Eyes." Ardal and Christopher kind of look at each other the way two people do when they've both just experienced something they can't explain. Then Ardal says he better be going. He's not even quite sure how he got to California, but he's due back in London for something really cool. Mr. Walken kind of sighs like "What a world"

and then proceeds to sweep the floor because he kind of carries a broom with him wherever he goes.

You make your way back over to the Rib Eyes and you kind of sigh too, a refreshing sigh, like you're breathing spring. You kind of poke at the meat through the plastic. You feel a lot better, because in a time when you're feeling like this, which seems to be all too often around here, Ardal appeared completely unexpected to fill that little void occupied always by temporary tenants. Ardal is probably temporary too. But you like him best, you think. And you do feel better. Because it's the little things that kill you and the little things that get you through. And then Christopher Walken comes and kind of accidentally sweeps you into the trash.

ooo

M'ija, m'ija, she calls
us all, though none of us are
her daughters, exactly.
We are one or two generations removed
from being *m'ija* – the only Spanish
she will ever speak, besides *chile verde*,
and even that burns
with a foreign tongue.

Maybe, she thinks, at first
glance, we do not look
like her. We are white as her
husband was, made more white
by white fathers. She feels safe
in our colorless embrace, admitting only
to being Spanish, ignoring the Mexican
accent of her sisters.

Dirty Mexican greaser – spat words
suspended as she checks the box
marked WHITE, glad that we
keep her secret so blatantly under
a pale color.

But – *cuidado, abuela!* – leave me
in the sun too long, my skin will sing
your dark song.

FOR WONG KAR-WEI

A beautiful gesture in rain petals and cobblestone. A beautiful gesture given in billet-doux, in a mosaic pattern, typed finely on keys. In ruffled petticoats and windbreakers, gifts of glass bottles clattering on the ground. In the fuzzy tail of a cat, in the tiger stripe, in the knock on a door. A fan turns old blades and cigarette smoke and spread legs. In centering on a pin point, in emanation off the screen of something programmed to love. Money bought the ticket, water made puddles in the sink, a sponge was wrung out, a tattoo of an ancient ship, of mariners and intuition, places fled, drinking the hours asleep, and the people in the square, and fingernails too long. Women wearing ties, hong kong when it rains, a beautiful gesture just spent.

Anna kept saying she wanted to drive.
I let no one drive my car, but I drove them
through the streets of Mission, a cop
car tailing us for miles, a man in a black hat
in our rearview mirror, tailing us by 10 feet,
5 feet, enforcing something, keeping pace.

Matt took off his ball cap, and Anna
let her long blonde hair flow, the air
vents in the sides of the car whistling,
vents that looked like gills on trout,
gills for allowing us to move through
the streets as if they were streams.

He tailed us for more than 20 blocks.
When he turned onto a side street,
we reached out our arms into
the air moving around us in waves,
and we felt like we were stealing something.

TO DOROTHEA LANGE IN
HER DARKROOM

jessica jewell

Japanese Internment Camp, Manzanar

The two children are still.

Two right legs, bent at the knee, posture the bliss
of running—but there is no running.
Two heads, black hair, like unlit matches,
bound toward the horizon, the door of the mountain,
hidden from your view.

The clouds are not full of rain.
Do you hope they were born of wet soil
from American farms? They are smoothed white
from the low skirt of the sun, and fall down the eastern front
of the snow covered Sierra Nevadas. But you can't see
the eastern front, or the sun from the photograph.

The flag is bent into a triangle,
an almost perfect tulip, and is frozen in a soft wind.
Do you remember if the air was warm?
Do you think that photograph of one day, which you hold in your hands
in your darkroom, will somehow set behind the mountains
and drag out the white constellations over northern California?

Did you think everyone is hiding
behind the curtains of the shanties,
or the dust has clogged their throats
and their songs of lament are beyond earshot for the moment?
Do you want to wait for them, and take down their sorrows?

Those two children are alone
in the landscape. And you cannot wait long enough,
though nothing about this scene will change.
It remains, an exposed negative, an unfinished poem.

Even so,
it seems your desire has not fled.
And maybe this is the dream of your lonely art,
maybe those children are running because you need them to—
maybe they have photographed you.

**WOMAN OF THE HIGH
PLAINS, TEXAS PANHANDLE,
1938**

jessica jewell

OR AFTER THE PHOTOGRAPH BY DOROTHEA LANGE

Once, as a girl, I walked
to where the rolling begins,
and lay in the loamy fields
of bluestem grasses
blanketed by hackberry.
I didn't know it then,
but the buffalo were following
the cry of the Apache
over the Canadian River,
leaving the land to cotton tracks
and valleys of black oil.
So you must understand
that I cannot cross again
into the canyonlands.
What is missing, I fear,
is part of me –
the land,
stripped
and burning.

backs trickle full of feather gleaning black purple
oil slicking roof to sky. high on wires or fences
chaining link to yellow feet cragged as an esophagus

they caw or cry. a crowd is called a murder;
their gagging crack of beaks break seeds into
syllables through nights too brittle to relieve us.

The first dirtbag I loved was a boy named Jimmy Coffee. As a rule, we ignored guys like Jimmy, who took shop class instead of calculus and spent too much time in parking lots, huddling in groups around primer-spotted cars, and rolling up their sleeves to show off the spider web tattoos on their forearms when they picked fights with the jocks.

It was a perfect summer. We had just finished junior high, and I spent every day as a guest at the private pool where my best friend, Toni, and my other wealthy friends belonged. From time to time, I would see Jimmy watching Toni from behind the ten-foot high chain link fence that guarded the pool from the rest of the world. He was impossibly good looking: dark-skinned, ruddy in a Marlboro Man way, with the type of chiseled cheek bones that might have been carved out of expensive wood. Watching him stand there, propped up against his ten-speed bike, made me feel embarrassed and sorry for him. I wanted to run over to the fence when nobody was looking and tell him that he should go home, that Toni didn't even know he was alive, and even if she did, she wouldn't care. I wanted to tell him that he was going about this whole thing the wrong way.

Like Jimmy, I, too was a dirtbag; but unlike Jimmy, I took great pains to hide it from the rest of the world. Nobody knew a thing about me, or my life. They didn't know that my mother spent weeknights drinking in the Vagabond bar or that she befriended failed, drug-addicted lounge singers whom she invited to our home for Thanksgiving dinners. I made up elaborate excuses and lies to keep my friends from coming near my house, which was surrounded by poor people with problems.

Instead, I invented a phony version of myself that had no bearing on my real world. I mimicked Toni and other girls like her, who in my mind represented the ideal, privileged world that I knew from magazines and movies. In this world, girls inherited good hair and willowy bodies, which were passed down through generations of well-rested women, who like their mothers, had grown up in homes with thick walls and quiet rooms in homes governed by tan, well-groomed men.

Back then, my mother called me “Gloria Vanderbilt” and wondered out loud why I thought I was better than them. “Just who do you think you are?” she said, shaking her head with disgust. I looked at the run in her stocking, peeking over the worn down back of her cheap shoe, and said nothing. The answer seemed obvious, evoking in me a complicated blend of pity and anger. At age fifteen I knew with certainty that the wrong type of person could ruin your life, while others would deliver you the moon.

The day that Jimmy caught me staring at him at the pool, I scowled and looked away. Truthfully, I had been comparing him to the hordes of shirtless football players, wondering if Toni had noticed Jimmy and if so, what she thought of him. When Jimmy turned toward me and smiled, he had caught me off guard. Deep down, I knew that I had started something, which both terrified and excited me.

Soon after, Jimmy called me, quietly clearing his throat before he asked for “Jennifer,” a name that only parents and teachers used. An uncomfortable silence passed before he divulged the reason for his call: he wanted Toni’s phone number, which was unlisted. I was used to getting calls from guys who wanted Toni’s number, but I felt a surge of injustice for the sole reason that I had noticed him and Toni hadn’t. I forced a laugh and told him no way, saying that she was dating practically every guy on the high school football team right now, stressing football, which I knew he didn’t play.

“Look, Jimmy,” I finally said, “You’re wasting your time, okay?”

When he called me the next night, we talked for fifteen minutes, then twenty, and eventually he stopped asking about Toni, and I stopped watching the clock. It was surprisingly easy to talk to him, and I found myself able to relax in a way I couldn’t do with other guys I was trying so hard to impress. We knew things about each other that I would never reveal to any of my popular friends. Both our mothers worked menial labor, worried about money, and struggled to keep their delinquent

children from landing in jail, soldiering on without the aid of sleep, money, or men.

In the meantime, I dodged Jimmy's request for a date. How on earth could we even go on a date? Did he expect to pick me up on his bike, or would he have to ask his mother to drive us? I imagined the two of us bouncing around in the back of her pick-up truck as we drove down Main Street, jumping out like dogs in front of the movie theatre. What would Toni say when news of the date got back to her? Our town was far too small to do anything without being noticed, and going to the fair with Jimmy was social suicide.

One night, toward the end of summer, I went with Toni to a high school party. I was standing among a group of girls in someone's backyard, forming the allegiances that would secure my popularity in high school. A girl standing next to me made a face and said, "What's *he* doing here?"

I looked over to see Jimmy squeezing through a gap between the gate and the fence, scanning the crowd with a panicked expression. Finally, he caught my eye and waved, and my stomach dropped. I rushed over to him, trying to seem annoyed for my friend's benefit, but unable to restrain my happiness at seeing him. He said he needed to talk to me, so I followed him to a corner of the yard. I waited in pained silence while he fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a ring, a thick band of tarnished silver with a huge black "J" engraved in the center. He handed it to me and asked me if I wanted to "go steady." Those words, "going steady," struck me as antiquated and silly. The gesture, too, was all wrong. Nobody I knew gave or received rings: further proof that he did not belong. I stared at his mouth, noticing for the first time that his front teeth were crooked and slightly yellow, as if they were suffocating each other.

In my imagination, the best parts of me emerge in this moment. I take his ring, and place it on my finger, proudly holding it under the moon-

light to show my friends, appreciating the sweet bravery of his declaration. I run my finger across his uneven teeth and tell him what I've wanted to tell him for weeks, that for the first time in my life, I feel something bigger than myself, which later I'll understand as love. I imagine taking his arm and leaving, turning my back on the people whose friendship will later dissolve almost immediately upon graduation.

That night, however, bolstered by the approving glances and snickers of my friends, I handed the ring back, explaining that I didn't want his ring, nor did I want anything to do with him. He nodded, glancing over my shoulder at the football players in heavy wool coats huddled around a beer keg, and at the clump of giggling friends behind me. He gave me a sad, resigned smile, turning his back and walking away, leaving me with his ring in my hand.

In the years that follow, I will come to understand what this cowardice cost me. In the meantime, however, I will spend my adolescence and a good chunk of my adult life working hard to impress the people who I deem to be better than myself. In my late twenties, I will marry, and become one of the couples that I had always admired in restaurants, pressed and fashionable, an icon of middle-class happiness. And out of shame, I will cut myself off from my family and all traces of my past. In my thirties, when I eventually become a ghostly shadow, I will do everything in my power to sabotage my marriage, explaining to my husband with swollen eyes that our failed marriage essentially boils down to one simple problem: I am an imposter.

That night, I watched the back of Jimmy's denim jacket disappear through the gate, relieved that I would no longer have to straddle these two disparate worlds. I carried his ring over to my girlfriends, laughing and rolling my eyes, until finally, Toni took it out of my hand and lobbed it over the fence where it landed with a distant, tinny thwack in a dark corner of a stranger's yard.

ooo

As a society, we are inundated with photographs that have been tweaked, transposed, montaged or airbrushed. The volume of photographs that we see, as well as the knowledge that the majority of them have been manipulated by one technique or another, has created a detachment from the photograph in general. My goal is for the viewer to be less interested in figuring out the “realness” of the photograph (as accurate representations of the real world) and focused more on the image as a symbolic element relating to his or her own experiences. I want to move away from the detachment we have with photography and restore the wonder we once had with the medium. In order to do this, the integration of more traditional forms of image making is needed. My intent is to elevate photography from the mere creation of an image, to the transformation of light into something tangible. Ironically, it is through increasing the level of manipulation of the original photograph that the image becomes more relatable.

planet two



planet four



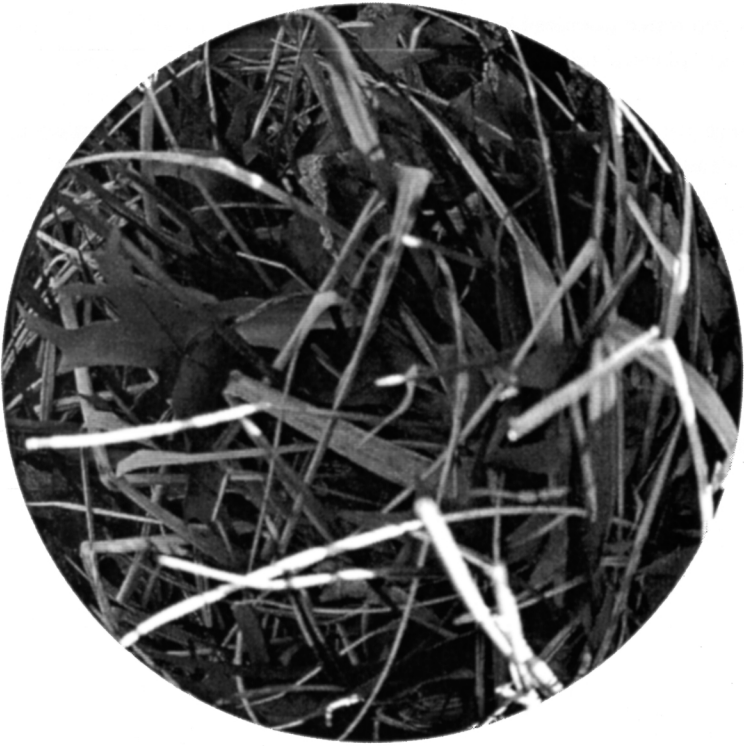
planet five



planet six



planet seven



“AS THE ARCHEOLOGY OF OUR THOUGHT EASILY SHOWS, MAN IS AN INVENTION OF RECENT DATE. AND ONE PERHAPS NEARING ITS END.” MICHEL FOUCAULT

I cannot completely tell the truth, (this is a timeless chant).

Here is a picture.

Here is the mechanical, the obvious, the childlike, the birdlike,
the reference to cities like Detroit or Oakland:
images playing, telling something.

There are caves filling and parachutes dawning, and my gypsy father is
dead now.

He is brazen in his casket, shedding his brown skin
and tired wool suit.

He is a reflection. Or,

he is alive in Peru, purging with the *Ayahuscero*, or serpent-dancing
near

the fire. In Belen slums they
wear amulets as helmets. We have our own charms...
(what is auspicious, what is daring?)

Today there are edible men like terrapin women.
What is flesh, but the tender thing, the wanting moments,
the slaughterhouse and battlefield.
Among the streets are anvils and hammers at newsstands,
fashioned men with gypsy fingers selling choices. "Feel it, feel the wind
in Patagonia." We are the
midnight nymphs of sacrifice,
the cinder-sweepers with mascara eyes.

This is an outcast's pledge:
Here is a heartbeat silenced.

AFTER MAY SWENSON

- 0** A hole. Or halo.
The final Hello.
- 1** A skyscraper or a raised fist.
- 2** A lion seated, with a proud mane.
- 3** Top half of caricatured lips, turned sideways, or jump rope caught mid-driveby.
- 4** Intersections of three streets. A standard abnormality in the otherwise city-grid. The arrow points up, towards the rich people.
- 5** A policeman—a word-association game himself:
Warring. Vice. Red. Cop.
- 6** A noose, or umbilical cord,
of ambiguous length,
still attached
to head, or body.

7 A ly_chi_g,
_oose ce_sored by
white folks with se_sibilities.

8 The universe in diagram:
A cosmic hourglass.
(Note enigmatic shape,
absence of any valve of origin,
how end overtakes beginning.)
Knotted like a shoelace
and whipped back and forth
can serve as a model of time.

9 Go ask Alice when she's 10 ft high.

10 A skyscraper falling into a hole.
Or a fist raised to heaven.
Open? Open. Shut? Shut.

The woman in the corner lights a cigarette.
Cool cats keep time inside their shoes.
As the room heats up, the man starts to sweat.
Jazz seeps from his saxophone;
the music saturates the night.
All eyes are attentive on the pair that's closed.

At this hour, most joints would be closed,
but just like the woman's cigarette,
it keeps burning into the night.
The man on stage wears no shoes.
All he needs is a little soul and his saxophone.
Playing in front of people is no sweat.

The woman's low-cut dress presents glistening sweat
on her chest. Her heart is vacant, but closed.
Her pain's enveloped by the wail of his saxophone.
She lights another cigarette,
longing to have more comfortable shoes.
It will be another slow walk home through the night.

For the man, it's all but another night,
ushering another splendid sweat.
He doesn't hear the taps of their shoes,
as he pours out his heart; his mind is closed.
He knows not of her gleaming cigarette,
for his true love is his saxophone.

They, oblivious as well, only hear his saxophone
and the chatter of good company, enjoying their night.
A stranger lends a light for another's cigarette
as a fiancée fans herself, abating the sweat
that threatens protrusion, though her lover's eyes are closed.
Electrified, he doesn't feel the floor under his shoes.

At last, the man dons his shoes
and, for the moment, disengages himself from his saxophone.
It's time; the club will be closed,
but for the woman, it can't be over, this night.
She wipes her brow and her sweat
persists as she sucks on her last cigarette.

But it is over. Emptiness fills the night.
The man is gone; he eloped with his saxophone.
The woman leaves behind a burning cigarette.

DIRTY LITTLE POEM

crystal gibbins

you tell me
you only like dirty poems—
the kind that
beats, bites,
steals the shirt off your back
& spends your hard-earned cash—
the kind that
makes your voice crack
& spit gritty words
under salty lights
in a strange city—
the kind that
demands sex
leaves you hungry
for limp cigarettes
& one paper match
of happiness—
the kind that
gets high
pisses smoke upward
from its charred lungs
like jazz musicians
blowing long scratchy blues
late into the evening—
the kind
your mamma would hate—
the kind that
carries a switchblade
wears thick scarred flesh
gets drunk
steals a car
comes over to my place
looking for love

Know this—
he will wake up.
The green bottles
into the trash.
cushions from the pillow fight
gathered.
Brought indoors
where they belong.

Your sister, circling
out front on her bike,
will come home.
Your mother will clean spilled
soda and dinner scraps.
It will happen.
I know.

Soon, folding chairs.
swinging your legs.
A woman who bakes
mini cheesecakes.
A blue book,
with something
about God.

There will be a pool.
He will jump in,
wash the sweat away.
He will build porches
leading to it, so your feet
don't touch the dirt.

You whisper into my ear, our bodies entangled on my white synthetic sheets, limbs fanning out like a river delta, "Did you know that this album is all improvised?"

It's a late-summer night. The CD has long since ceased playing, even the faint traffic noises have stopped. Lights out. If I concentrate, I can hear the sheen of sweat that encases your body.

"Well, most of it. Miles Davis," she says, "came into the studio with the skeleton of each song and then everyone else just improvised off him. The tape was rolling and whatever they came up with was the final song. It's harder than it seems."

"Why is it so hard?" I ask.

"Because." I feel your body separate from mine, your voice at my ear as you prop yourself on one elbow. "The starting point, the phrase, has to be so flexible. It has to be so open for variation, but it can't be too constricting or it will choke off any creativity. Everyone will just play the same note over and over."

I know all this, and you must know that I know. "I didn't know you liked jazz that much," I say.

"I looked it up," you say. "Just trying to impress you with my knowledge. Next time, I'll spout something about baseball."

"It worked. Consider me impressed," I say. Now is not the time I want to be thinking about next time because I'm never sure if we will have a next time.

Now conscious of the time we don't have—the hours, the days—my hands seek you. I hear your sobs. "Why are you crying?" I can't tell where your tears end and the sweat begins. I want to dive into your ocean. Let the salt water wash me clean.

"Because this can't last," you say.

"Of course it can," I say. I reach for the stereo remote and the bass line fills the room. "We'll just keep hitting repeat."

ooo

You came to me encumbered, a husband and a life trailing and crashing behind you like a derailed train. You didn't want this to happen, but to be honest, I did. Ever since he married you, probably even before that. There are times, like now, when I feel I knew you before we even met. Sometimes, lying alone on my bed, watching the intrepid journey of the ceiling fan around and around, I find you at odd places in my memories. Places you shouldn't be. I see you in my high school, healing the wounds of a lost boy. I see you the day my dad died. You're with me in the hospital. And when my memories turn to fantasy, I see you the day before the wedding, a breathless confession delivered as we sit in my idling car. Rain streaks the windows and our words fog the insides as you tell me you are making a big mistake and it's me, it's always been me.

It wasn't right away. When we first met, you were just my friend's newest girlfriend. A new third wheel. I thought you were nice and he seemed happy and that's all I really thought about it. But then I started to notice things. I would surreptitiously glance at your face, taking snapshots that I could project on the inside of my eyelids later. I would look at you because I couldn't understand what it was about you that made me look at you. Falling in love with you was a recursive program, a closed loop.

So I watched and I learned that when you dance at shows, you can't keep time. You are always one beat ahead or one behind. Your tongue pokes its way out of your mouth right before you sneeze. Later I came to know that the inside of your arm is an erogenous zone and there are times you'll cry after you come. Tears of joy obviously, I tease, but tears of relief you tell me. It's so intense you say and I envelop your body in mine, wanting to protect you from everything, including myself.

We've talked it to death. Blue in our faces as we rant about the unfairness of it all. It's not fair you cry. It's not fair, I agree. We follow hypothetical situations down the rabbit hole.

"We went to college in the same damn city, you'd think we would have run into each other there," you say. "Which means I would have met him as a friend of yours, a friend from home. Instead of the other way around."

I lie to myself and agree, the possibility could have been there, even though Berklee kids didn't hang out at the same places as BU kids. "Maybe a Red Sox game," I say even though we both know you don't like baseball.

"My sorority had an outing to Fenway every year, why didn't I go?"

"We could have stood next to each other in the line for beer." We leave aside the fact that I would never have spoken to a sorority girl in the beer line at Fenway. And you wouldn't have spoken to a skinny, pierced kid with artistic pretensions and a ragged goatee.

You sigh. "Like we would have even talked to each other then. Even in hypothetical situations, our sense of timing is lousy."

We follow them all the way down the rabbit hole but we always arrive back at the same place. You have a husband, I have a friend, and what we share, besides him, is poor timing.

Friend? you would ask because I haven't told you that I removed the 'best' from my title. A best friend doesn't do what we just did.

Here's another example of poor timing. I never told you this but it was on your wedding day that I knew I was in love with you. A wedding can draw out the most stubborn, resistant stain. I was only three feet away from you, my rental tuxedo binding me with its totem of 'best man.' You, on the other hand, tell me that when you got married, I was just his best man. It wasn't until later that you started to realize that you

had feelings for me. Whenever I let my ego down and I'm flooded with insistent waves of shame and guilt, I wonder if it's only because I'm someone other than him.

It's been easy, the mechanics of it. He's out of town a lot, the two of us are friends so it's no surprise that we might be seen together. We were just watching a movie you could tell him and that would be that. I've created a fiction of a woman I'm supposedly dating, in case he has any suspicions. Nothing serious yet so he doesn't need to meet her. No doubles with you and him. She's a fantasy but you eclipse her. I don't know how he doesn't know, just by my descriptions of her. Even an amateur archeologist would be able to unearth you beneath my lies.

I went to your house a few weeks ago for dinner. Just the three of us. He told me about his business trips, I told him about shows I had done and I heard again your stories about your office. You've already told me about your run-in with the guy from accounting. But the first time I heard it we were naked and my fingers were traipsing about your body. I like to start at the apex of your hip and slide my finger to the valley of your waist. Using your curves to gain momentum, I launch my fingers up like a ski-jumper and land at your breasts. From there, it's an easy trek to your nipples. I knew that's what you were remembering while you spoke about the guy from accounting. I could see it in your eyes. Later, when he had to take a phone call and you were clearing the table, you bent down to my ear and said "ski-jump." I was so hard I had to escape to your bathroom. What kind of triangle did we make that night? Isosceles? Equilateral? You were in the kitchen, wet both from the dishwasher and memory, he was in the den, blithely talking on the phone and I was crouched over the toilet- fifteen years old again-furiously jacking because my hard-on wouldn't go away. All I wanted was to eliminate the third angle, follow the straight line to you and take you from behind in our kitchen.

I told you all that tonight and you made me tell it to you again when I

was inside you. It turned us both on. What I didn't tell you is how angry I was that night in your bathroom. My semen isn't good enough—you always make me wear a condom—it was freeing to just let it go, instead of trapping it in a reservoir tip. I know he doesn't wear a condom, he's told me. He's also told me you two barely have sex anymore. I make reassuring noises to him as I feel better.

I don't have any legal entanglements with him. You do, but not me. He can take you to divorce court, but there's no best friend court. I can picture the three of us in a court room anyway. He'd put you on the stand and you'd have to state for the record the when (over six months now), the where (motels, my place, my car, once in your bed when he was away for a week), the how (he'd probably want to skip this part). You'd have to tell the judge how you told me you don't love him anymore and that you told me my cock is bigger and I was a better lover. That would be the high point for me. He'd put me on the stand and I'd talk about how I betrayed him, screwed him over, stuck a knife in his back. Basically I just old-fashioned fucked him over. The jury wouldn't even have to deliberate. But there is no court for best friends, even if I am exhibit A why there should be.

ooo

"Just leave him," I tell you.

"It's not that easy."

"It's exactly that easy. People do it all the time. All our parents did it."

"We've built up a life together, I can't just throw it away."

"What life? You're cheating on him," I say.

"So are you."

ooo

He was the high school basketball star and I was the band geek who

secretly wanted to be the high school basketball star. The closest I got to the court was a row back, keeping the stats from each game. I tallied all his points, rebounds, and assists. He was a conductor, getting all his teammates into their places. Once, he took an elbow to the nose and had to come to the bench. He heard the assistant coach berate me because I didn't know how many time outs we had left. He turned to me, crimson staining the tissue held to his nose and gave me a smile. I gave him an extra assist that game. Maybe he was too short for college ball, but he never even tried. Quit the team freshman year and fell into the Business crowd. Hedge funds, amortization, futures: all foreign words to me. We had lost our shared language. Sometimes I think his selection of me as his best-man was merely based on history, of what our friendship used to be. I wonder if that is a good enough excuse.

I think of people and things to blame. I blame God, time, reliance on foreign oil, my congressman. I blame him: for meeting you first, for having eyes women always swoon over, for having the same taste in women as I do, his stupid stories, his work, his ignorance of you, his fingers, toes, his blood, his DNA. You. I blame you for having black hair, for laughing at my jokes, for taking an interest in my music (who asked you to care, anyway?), for taking me seriously, for being able to give the best blowjob I've ever had, for meeting him first, for not liking baseball, for having olive skin as smooth as a banister, for being so complex I could see you everyday for fifty years and still find something new each morning. Me. I blame me for making the first move.

It would be easier to have alcohol to blame, but that's the one thing I can't blame. That night, the first time, neither of us were drinking after my show. I was on a post-show high, and I told you how much it meant to me to see you there. And it was the truth. Maybe that's something else to blame: the truth. Because it was true that I kept scanning the audience to see if you had made it. I told you that when you showed up during the third song I felt like I finally had an audience. I first saw it spark in your pale blue eyes so I covered your hand with mine on the

stained wood of a barroom table. He wasn't there, not at the bar or even in town, he was so far away. This was ours and truthfully that's what I'd always wanted. Walking to your car, I wrapped my arm around your waist and pulled you close to me. You fit perfectly against me. Tab A into slot B. We kissed in your late model Toyota sedan. One hand bracing the gear shift, my other hand caressed the glissando-soft skin of your cheek.

I want to be the one in your wedding pictures, let him be second place, paired with your older sister. I write treacle love songs, about Sunday mornings and a woman who understands me. The band laughs at me, so instead I write songs about two rotting worms pinned on a hot sidewalk after a rain shower. They don't laugh anymore, just look at me funny. I want my middle back. This is all or nothing. For single nights a few times a month, I get you, all of you. I get your fingernails on my back, lips on my skin. I get you opening yourself to me and I can't fucking believe, much less describe where you take me. This is what I should be writing songs about. But every other night, I get nothing of you. Maybe a remnant of a scent or a smear of lipstick on a glass. I was like a cocky kid before a roller coaster, I thought I could handle the ups and downs, they were part of the fun.

"Do you love me?" I ask.

"Yes."

"But not enough to leave him?" I ask.

"Why do you keep going back to this?"

"I have to. It's our phrase," I say.

ooo

Miles is still playing blues.

"Ok," you say, "it's your turn to impress me."

“Come on, that wasn't impressive enough?” I imagine I can hear your smile. It's your shy smile, the one that appears when we talk about sex. I doubt he knows the different timbres of your smiles.

“You know what I mean. Impress me like we were out on a date, trying to get me into bed,” you request. Your hand touches my face but you mistake my tears for sweat. “I overheated you,” you say.

My throat is dry and dusty. I want water but it seems like too much effort to get up right now. Everything keeps me pinned to the sweaty sheets. I have you in my bed but I want the stories. I want to cut our relationship open and trace our history like the rings of a tree. There's our first date, when I proposed, the vacation from Hell at the Cape that we can laugh about now but boy did everything go wrong that week. Kids, retirement. Look at the rings of adulterers and what do you see? Credit card bills that need to be shredded because of the motel charges, sticky webs of cover stories, condom wrappers accounted for more carefully than a household budget. What's a history that can't be shared?

“Did you know that this album is all improvised?” I ask you.

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A TOUCHSTONE INTERVIEW WITH TED KOOSER

INTERVIEW BY DENNIS ETZEL JR., EDITOR

On November 4, 2005, Ted Kooser visited Kansas State University and gave a reading in the Union Little Theatre. TOUCHSTONE arranged an interview with the United States Poet Laureate beforehand and traveled to Lincoln, Nebraska during the University of Nebraska's Summer Writers' Conference to meet with Mr. Kooser. With his recent books *Delights & Shadows*, winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice For Beginning Poets* and promoting the website for the free newspaper column *American Life In Poetry* (www.americanlifeinpoetry.org), TOUCHSTONE discovered just how busy Mr. Kooser is.

Touchstone: First, I wanted to congratulate you on the Pulitzer Prize and also having a second term as Poet Laureate.

Ted Kooser: I've had quite a run of luck. The English Department had an honors' reception at the end of the semester and when they asked me to come up I told them in view of the kind of luck I've had, I bought a present for the English Department—ten lottery tickets. And it turned out they made fourteen dollars from it. I was kind of hoping they would win 32 million or something.

T: Yeah—to try that luck out.

TK: Yeah. But it's really been quite a time for me. It's dizzying in many ways, and none of it seems quite real still.

T: I was at the Rockhurst reading (Kansas City), and I love the story about the night you were told you were Poet Laureate and you had to take DVD rentals back.

TK: Oh, yeah. I was so flummoxed by this, I backed out and tore the rearview mirror from the side of the car, drove over to Seward to return these DVD's that were overdue. When I got there, I thought maybe I'll go to the body shop first and see how much it was going to cost to repair

the mirror. I went to the body shop and they told me \$140. So I said just fine, drove back home, and realized I still had the DVD's in the car.

T: Are you the first poet from the Midwest to be given Poet Laureate?

TK: Not necessarily from the Midwest, but from the Great Plains.

Howard Nemerov, Mona Van Dyne from St. Louis, Rita Dove is from Cleveland, so there have been others from the Midwest. But from the Great Plains, I'm the first one. Of course, William Stafford is a Great Plains writer, but he was in Oregon when he was the laureate.

T: I wanted to talk about your *American Life in Poetry* project. I looked over the website, and how it provides poems for newspapers. Is that a free service?

TK: Yes. Anyone can use it, online or download it personally. We've really had quite a lot of success with it. It's a little over two months old and we have around 9 million in circulation. Something around 90 to 100 newspapers using it. Last week I had an editor of a small paper e-mail me saying she didn't want to use the poem because the poet had a dangling participle in the first line. So we're going to get some of that, I suppose. I think it's probably okay for poets to use dangling participles.

T: Yes—the grammar police!

TK: And I'm pushing this all the time, trying to make connections in states. And some of the state poet laureates in South Carolina, Indiana, and New Hampshire have been mailing in their states about it, so I'm trying to work some angles—to get some more distribution for it. I think by the end of the year we will have a lot of readers.

T: It's a great idea. I think with *Poetry In Motion*, one of the previous projects in subways, there were often only little snippets, not entire poems.

TK: There has been another column, too. Robert Hass, when he was Poet Laureate, started a column syndicated through the *Washington Post*. But as with any syndicated column, you have to pay for it. And our

advantage is that it is free. Newspapers are not interested in spending 25 dollars a week for a poetry column. The fact that we're giving it away helps a lot.

T: Thank you for putting this forward. I think it will help in exposing people to more poetry. I have a question about conferences. You're here for the Nebraska Summer Writers Conference. I was wondering if you do any other conferences.

TK: I've been at various conferences over the years. This year, I'm not doing much here. I'm doing a reading here tonight. I'm not teaching any classes or anything. The idea of taking on five or seven days of work is more than I wanted to do. I have plenty of stuff to do. To give you an example of how my schedule runs, on Tuesday the 21st of May, I drove to Kansas City which is four hours from where I live, got on a plane for Los Angeles, was picked up in Los Angeles by a driver who drove me to Santa Barbara, did a reading at the University of Santa Barbara that evening, went to a bed and breakfast and slept a few hours, was driven back to Los Angeles, and flew back to Kansas City for several things with the Mid-American Arts Alliance down there. Then Friday morning, I drove home, changed into my good suit, and drove to Omaha for the University of Nebraska Donor's Dinner the President asked me to say a few words at. I went home that night, and woke up the next day, a Saturday, where there were two weddings I was asked to read poems at. I went home, went to bed, and got up the next morning to fly to New York with my wife. We spent the night in New York and had a Pulitzer lunch on Monday. On Monday afternoon, we flew back to Nebraska. With Tuesday at home, we went to Bismark on Wednesday, for three days. Well, my schedule looks like that for pretty much the next year. But it's very important for me to show that someone like me from out in the middle of nowhere can do this and do it well.

T: That's the way I have felt. I've wondered how someone from "here" can make it in the poetry world. I know many of the local poets, but

does anyone in New York?

TK: I think there are people in the literary community on the East coast who do recognize there are good writers out here, but there are plenty of them who don't, of course.

T: I wanted to talk about your poetry and your new book, *The Poetry Home Repair Manual*, which I think is wonderful. I wish I could have read it years ago when I was first starting out in writing. You cover a lot of material in the book with things every writer should know. I went through several books that said "poetry is this," to find everything is in your book with truly practical examples.

TK: A lot of those poets I'm using in that book are the ones that aren't usual subjects—the "usual suspects." They are people whose work I've admired over the years; Frank Steele, for instance. There's that poem in there about waving goodbye which is a marvelous poem that needs to be noticed.

T: I think even the one-line poem "Artichoke" is great. It's a good example to challenge the rules of poetry, in that poetry sets its own rules. I also like, from the beginning, the poet's self-education and the poetry as a means of communication. I was wondering, is there anything that you hope to communicate in your own poetry.

TK: Every poem presents a different communication. The important thing for me is to think about the fact that there is an audience out there, to think about the expectations of that audience and use their expectations in my favor as I write the poem. At least to be aware that there is someone on the other end, I think, is very important. There is a lot of controversy about that in the poetry community. There are poets who think that you shouldn't pay any attention to that at all. But for me, that is an important aspect to consider. And I think that is why many beginning poets fail, because they do not have a sense of their audience.

T: I find that is true. When I first started writing, I tried to make my

poems cryptic. *laughing*

TK: Yeah, that's because of the Modern period. We thought that is what makes poetry neat, because it was puzzling and baffling. No, that's not right. We're looking for poems that move us, touch our hearts, and provide us with fresh ways of looking at things. So why trouble with a poem that is nothing but an equation.

T: I also like how you mention in your book how what inspires you, that it could be a use of language in a different way, or a glimpse of life, but it isn't by starting with a list of ideas.

TK: I don't know, there are poets who work from ideas. But I don't think a lot are.

T: I wanted to ask you about the poets you return to. You mentioned in your reading Tranströmer as a favorite poet. Are there any other poets you tend to return to?

TK: That shifts over the years. I will find a poet I am really interested in. Right now, I am reading a lot of Machado, the Spanish poet, and that's because friends of mine are really into Machado, writing me about it, sending me books of Machado. But I will find a poet every once in a while I get interested in intensely, but it's constantly shifting. I'm fond of these poems in translation by Robert Bly, like Tranströmer and Jacobson, a Norwegian poet, and it may be because I'm fond of Robert's writing as well as theirs. Beginning poets can really get a lot from his earlier poems, like in "Silence In the Snowy Fields." They have subjects that are around us all of the time, snow in the field, a barn in the distance, and turkey sheds. When I wrote *Local Wonders*, I have an image of snow sliding off of a turkey shed, which comes from Robert, I think.

T: It's interesting all of the influences we get. So what was the first poem you remember reading?

TK: I talk in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual* about Walter de la Mare's

“The Listeners,” or Scott’s “The Lady of the Lake.” We didn’t have any poetry books at home, besides Edgar Guest. Eddie Guest was one of these popular poets, like Whittier, kind of familiar, corny, sentimental. I think I use one in the *PHRM*, one about mother. We had Edgar Guest books around, but that’s about all. I remember when I was in college reading people like e. e. cummings.

T: You mentioned sentimentality in poetry, and I think that is one of the major pitfalls when writing poetry. We sometimes fall into what we expect out of a poem, what a poem should be.

TK: When it comes to sentiment, I think we have to be willing to show our feelings. We don’t want to gush, but it’s a hard line. I sometimes get criticized for being too sentimental. I don’t read my criticism anymore, so it doesn’t hurt.

T: I don’t see that in your work. A friend of mine even commented about your work, that you show the social side of people, how people should be social, like in “Four Secretaries,” and how the need to care for others is missing from society.

TK: I genuinely believe everyone is trying the best they can. Interestingly, I talked to a man at a wedding five years ago who was a jailer for the county facility who processes the men going to death row in Huntsville, Texas. They kill one after another there; I’m not sure about the count, maybe 150 executions a year. And I asked, out of all of these people you’ve processed over the years, how many are genuinely evil? He said a small percentage, two or three percent. The rest of them had just made really stupid choices. I think that’s part of that, that people are just trying to do their best, even with whatever ignorance and prejudice and so on they have. Everyone would like to live the good life.

T: I also see poetry as helping people out. Maybe it’s an ideal, but there’s a quote from your book: “I urge you to write from your soul, no matter what you choose because that’s what really matters. You want to

write poems that connect with others, that can show your readers new ways of seeing, understanding, and enjoying the world.” I think it is to add value and meaning to life.

TK: Somewhere in there, I have that quote from Yeats, that the ultimate purpose is to be of service. I think there is something to that.

T: You talk about poetry being for the people, that they know the intrinsic value of poetry. But no one is turning to poetry and reading it. Which is why I’m excited about your project *American Life In Poetry*.

TK: I think that will help a little bit. I really think that, because of what happened with the Modern poets, where literary critics were looking for and supporting difficult work and the importance of Eliot, Pound, and Stevens, that poetry went into that direction because of the readers. I do readings around the country where people come up to me and say they have felt excluded from poetry. That it wasn’t for them, that kind of thing. I’m trying to show them, simply by example, that they can understand. So we will see what happens. Obviously, Ted Kooser is not going to change the shape of American poetry, but I can nudge it a little. Someone told me one time that if an aircraft carrier is floating on water, tied to a dock, that if you lean on it, the weight of a single human being can cause it to drift on the water. So, I’m out there trying to move the aircraft carrier.

T: I love these allegories you are using. I would like to ask you about metaphor. Things in the world can represent other things, to give us meaning, and poetry can be a reflection of that. What do you think about that in poetry?

TK: That is true. I say that in the book, that metaphor may connect us to a universal field of connection. I wrote a poem in the last few days that tries to connect two metaphors. It’s called “Beside a Highway.” (Mr. Kooser reads his poem.) So I take one metaphor and dismiss it for another. I like the idea of working with two strong metaphors in the

same poem.

T: I like how it enacts going from no hope into that there is hope. That's what I love about poetry.

TK: Yeah, it's good stuff.

T: Thank you for sharing your poem. What are other things you are planning to do? Are you doing any writing?

TK: I am, now that I've been home a few weeks. But when I'm on the road, I find it difficult to write. I'll get back to it, but this job is more important. The work of being a Poet Laureate is what I'm supposed to be doing now.

T: Thank you for all of your work as Poet Laureate and all of your poems.

TK: I appreciate that. Thank you for reading.

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Slice – Scuff – Slice – Scuff. Open – Close – Bend. Open – Close – Bend. Frustration. Have you ever watched a left handed person try to operate a simple pair of scissors? It's pretty funny isn't it? A device that was probably invented by a Neanderthal named Grug, and after eons of human development, we 21st century lefties still haven't figured out how to work them properly. Yeah. Real funny.

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Scissors (*n.*) – A cutting implement consisting of two blades joined by a swivel pin that allows the cutting edges to be opened and closed.

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Using scissors is one of the most frustrating activities I have ever participated in in my entire life. I am left handed, and that is what makes such a simple exercise so ridiculous. In case you have never seen a lefty use scissors, this is how it goes: We align the open blades with the paper in the direction we wish to cut. Then we close them. And the paper bends. And we open the scissors again. And close them again. And the paper bends again. And again. And again. It isn't just paper though. Suppose it's a loose thread on a shirt sleeve. The scissors come out. They close around the thread. It's a blue thread because the shirt is blue. And the scissors slice and slice and slice, and that annoying little blue thread never falls to the floor. It just kinks up on the edges of the blades. So now it's a blue shirt with a loose kinky thread. At this point there are two options. (Well, maybe there are more than that, but for this example there are just two.) The first option is this: The scissor-wielding lefty can admit defeat and fetch a second cutting device to cut the thread. The second option is to take the scissors in the right hand and try to awkwardly operate the device like a normal person would, and risk cutting an arm off in the process.

ooo

Less than 10% of the world's total population is left handed. Only 5%

are “strongly” left handed. 1 The distinction is small. Being left handed is loosely defined as the left hand being the hand you prefer to write with. However, this broad category allows for other activities to be done with the right hand, or with both. Being “strongly” left handed, on the other hand, means that the vast majority of everything a person does is with their left hand.

While researching this subject, I found an online questionnaire designed to determine a person’s “handedness.” I scored as “strongly” left handed. The other categories were mildly left handed, ambidextrous, and right handed. There was no “strongly” right handed category. 2

Of all the left handed people in the world, there are roughly twice as many male lefties as female.

ooo

With such a broad disparity between righties and lefties, it comes as no surprise that the world is built, structured, and organized in such a way as to benefit the greatest majority of people.

The language and writing systems of most of the world favor the right hand. Writing is done from left to right. If you are a right hander, you are able to see the letters and words as soon as you’ve written them. For a left handed person, the bulk of their hand continues to block the page until they are several words past the word they want to see. If I want to check spelling, handwriting quality, or to make certain I dotted or crossed a letter, I must lift my hand to do so. Cursive handwriting magnifies this problem even more due to its fast and flowing nature. Another problem for left handed people in a left to right system is smearing. I often end up smearing fresh ink or smudging pencil marks as I’m writing along, since my hand is constantly gliding over new words. Back in elementary school, when number two wooden pencils were a requirement, I always had a silvery-grey smudge on my pinky finger and outer palm. A right handed person’s hand glides over blank

white space and doesn't encounter these problems.

There are, however, a few writing systems that go from right to left. I have wondered on occasion what my life would be like if I were Hebrew or Arabic.

When I entered middle-school, the thing that made me happiest was when we were told that we could write in either cursive or print. From about second grade to sixth grade, the teachers all required that we write in cursive. As soon as I had the freedom to choose, I chose print, and I don't think I have written a single line of cursive since then. I don't know if I even remember how.

When I was in high-school, I had the bright idea one day of doing all my assignments on the back sides of my notebook paper to avoid the annoyance of the spirals, which are always in the way on the left margin. However, this stroke of genius didn't last very long, because my teachers didn't appreciate having to spend the time to figure out where I wrote my answers down at.

ooo

Did you know that there are actually left handed writing utensils? You might ask, "How can this be, when writing utensils are symmetric along a vertical axis?" Here's a hint: It isn't the shape that is changed on left handed pens and pencils. It's the words that are written on the utensil itself. Take a look at your pen or pencil. Hold it in your writing hand. Now, take note of which way the words are written. Do they go from tip to end in a manner that you are able to read the words correctly? Now take your pen in your left hand. The words are now upside down. On a left handed pen, the letters go from end to tip, so that they are correctly readable in the left hand. 3

None of my writing utensils are left handed.

ooo

In Physical Education class (P.E.) in Elementary school, we had different sports units that we covered throughout the year. We covered almost every American sport there is. Kickball, football (two hand touch, of course), soccer, dodge-ball, track, basketball, and so forth. There was one sport I always dreaded, when it came into season. Baseball. My PE teacher had a big sack of baseball gloves that he would dump out onto the grass. We were supposed to rummage through the pile and find a glove that fit. He didn't have any left handed gloves.

Here is a basic description of how a game of baseball went for me in elementary PE class: I would put a glove on my left hand, just like everybody else. Then, if the ball was hit or thrown to me, I would catch it with my left hand, take the ball into my right hand, wiggle my hand out of the glove and place it under my right arm. Then I'd take the ball back into my left hand and throw it. Needless to say, I wasn't very good at fielding in baseball. I usually ended up taking a position in the deep outfield, where the ball was never likely to go.

ooo

Babe Ruth, Larry Bird, and Pelé were all great left-handed athletes in baseball, basketball, and soccer, respectively.

In the 1992 Presidential Election, all three major candidates (Bill Clinton, George Bush Sr. and Ross Perot) were left handed.

Alexander the Great, Charlemagne, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon Bonaparte were left handed. 4

ooo

One area of the modern world in which I have learned to adapt is in computing. Everything about it is very right handed. Take a look at your keyboard some-time. It isn't symmetric at all, is it? The arrow keys are on the right side. The numeric keypad is on the right side. Page-up, Page-down, Delete, Home, End, and Insert are on the right side.

The enter key and backspace key are on the right. The mouse is always on the right.

When I was first learning how to use a keyboard and mouse, I experimented with moving the mouse over to the left. This worked pretty well when I was at home on my own computer, but when I was on a school or friend's computer, it became more of a hassle. The biggest annoyance, however, were those ergonomic mice. The ones that are curved to fit nicely into the right palm. Those were really awkward to use with the left hand. Eventually I decided to learn to do it in the same fashion as everybody else.

There are such things as left handed keyboards, but I don't own one. They are the opposite of what I described above. The numeric keypad is on the right, and the page buttons and so forth. However, the left handed keyboard is flawed in its design. In order for it to be a perfect inverse of a standard keyboard, the layout of the keys would need to be rearranged. On a standard keyboard the top row begins with "QWERTY." Therefore, on a truly left handed keyboard, the top row should begin with "[] [POIU." But they don't.

Supposedly, 60% of all typing is done with the left hand on a normal keyboard. For right handed people, that means 60% of their keystrokes are made with their weak hand. If left handed keyboard designers wanted to truly create the exact opposite in experience, 60% of all typing should be done with the right hand on a left handed keyboard.

ooo

There are some types of scissors that are harder to use than others. For instance, the worst type of scissors that I have ever used are those plastic ones that they make grade-school kids use. The ones made of all plastic that have a very thin strip of metal fastened on the insides for cutting. They are always made of two colors. Like white and red, or white and orange. Anyway, like I was saying, these are the worst scissors I have ever used. I have seen right handed adults use them, and they are actually

able to cut things with them, but I can't. I just snip and snip and snip, and usually end up destroying whatever it is I'm trying to cut before I ever actually succeed in cutting.

Another type of scissor that I cannot use are the ones in which the handles are fashioned to fit nicely around the hand. The thumb hole has a flat inner edge that the thumb can rest on and the finger slot is carved out to nicely fit the outer contour of the hand. The right hand. For a lefty, these scissors are the most uncomfortable pieces of equipment to use. All the angles go against the hand and create tight spaces and make them hard to even hold properly, let alone cut with.

ooo

Being left handed does have some advantages, though. In the world of sports, lefties or "southpaws" have the upper hand on righties in certain positions and activities. For instance: lefties are often considered to make the best pitchers in baseball due to the way the mound faces the plate, and they make great boxers because of the surprise factor of a solid left punch.

In my own life, I am able to do a lot of things equally well with both hands. For example, as I mentioned earlier, I am able to use a computer mouse with both hands. In baseball, I might suck as an outfielder, but I can bat pretty well – from either side of the plate. In elementary school PE class, during the winter we had a hockey unit. The teacher had a whole bunch of cheap plastic hockey sticks, all of them right handed. But I am a lot more capable with a right handed hockey stick than a righty baseball glove. If a left handed hockey stick is available, I prefer to use it, but I can play either way if I have to. In a lot of activities, I am what is considered to be "ambidextrous."

ooo

Ambidextrous (*adj.*) – 1. Able to use both hands with equal facility. 2. Unusually Skillful.

At first, being ambidextrous sounds like a good thing. But for a left handed person, a deeper investigation of the word reveals that it is not. In principle, it is fine, but the actual word is somewhat insulting in the context of its etymological roots.

ooo

In Latin, the word for being right handed is *dexter*. *Dexter* is also the Latin word for skillful. So to be dexterous is to be skillful or to be right handed. They go together. Which implies that to be left handed is to be unskillful. The literal meaning of the Latin definition of ambidexterity is to be right handed with both hands. So for a lefty who is skilled at using both hands, being told that they are right handed with both hands isn't very flattering.

In many European languages, the word "right" stands for authority and justice. Two examples of this are the French word *droit* and the German word *recht*. Even in English this is true. The phrase "do the right thing" means do the good thing. Which implies that to "do the left thing" is to do the wrong thing. In Mandarin Chinese, the word *zuo* means left. *Zuo* not only means left, but it also means improper or out of accord. The left side is considered to be the bad side. The phrase "left path," or *zuo-dao*, means illegal or immoral. The very essence of language conspires against the lefties. 5

ooo

Sinister (*adj.*) – 1. Threatening or foreshadowing evil. syn: Baleful, Menacing, Ominous. 2. Corrupt, Evil, Bad, Base. 3. On the left side: Left.

ooo

So where did handedness originate? I found a couple ancient theories that have since been debunked, due to some fairly obvious flaws, but they are still interesting to think about.

The Warrior and Shield Theory: The heart is on the left side of the body, so when warriors went to war, it was only natural for them to carry their shields on their left arm to protect their heart. That would leave their right hand free to wield a weapon. This led to the right hand being the favored one since it was on the arm that did the most work.

Plato's Nursemaid Theory: Plato observed that most women preferred to carry their children in their left arm so that their right arm would be free to perform other tasks. Because of this, the child was in the position to cling to the mother with the right arm, leaving its left arm free to act. Plato believed that hand favoritism switched from generation to generation as babies switched from the right to the left side of the mother.

As we now know, hand favoritism is biological. It is passed on through genetics, and left handedness is a recessive trait. The chances of the left handed gene coming up are very small. Even in a situation where both parents are left handed, their offspring only has a 26% chance of being left handed. In the case of twins, if one twin is left handed, the other has a 76% chance of also being left handed. Because the odds are so small, it is speculated that other influences, such as upbringing and social conditioning, are responsible for hand favoritism. 6

ooo

I have heard it said that left handed people tend to be more artistic and creative. This is because of the divisions of the brain hemispheres. The most commonly accepted theory on handedness is that for right handed people, the left side of the brain controls motor skills and speech, and the right side of the brain deals with abstract thinking. This theory claims that left handed people's brains are structured differently and that motor skills share the same hemisphere as the creative/abstract side and that the speech side of the brain is left to itself. This theory lends itself perfectly to another theory that claims that left handed people are more likely to be dyslexic. Whether or not these theories are true, I myself have slight dyslexia. It was worse when I was a child, as I often

got my “b’s and “d’s” mixed up, but even to this day I’ll catch myself saying something that doesn’t quite make sense because I’ve switched the proper word order, and occasionally I even swap the first letters of two consecutive words in a sentence.

It was a common practice in the past for parents and teachers to force their left handed children and students to learn to operate with their right hands in an attempt to ‘normalize’ them. Up until the later part of the twentieth century, teachers would often use a ruler to slap the wrist of anyone that was attempting to write with their left hand. My dad is left handed and he let me develop my motor skills on my own terms, and even encouraged my left handedness.

ooo

Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael were all left handed.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig von Beethoven were left handed.

Benjamin Franklin and Albert Einstein were left handed. In childhood, Einstein was a slow learner which has been attributed to possible dyslexia.⁷

ooo

A good pair of scissors is a rare thing. When a lefty finds a pair that they like, and that they can actually use, they tend to be very protective of them. My dad has a favorite pair of scissors. He keeps them hidden away in a dresser drawer. In my house, we keep a pair of utility scissors in one of the utensil drawers in the kitchen. They work fine for my mom and my brother, but I can’t ever get them to work. When I was younger, if I needed to use scissors for anything, I had to ask my dad to let me use his. “Make sure you put them back when you’re finished,” he would always say. Most of the time I didn’t get a chance to put them back though. He would almost always come and spirit them away from me the second I appeared to be done.

There were a couple of occasions when I misplaced his scissors, and when that happened, righteous anger was soon to follow. "Where are my good scissors?!" I would hear him ask, no matter where I was in the house.

The biological recessive trait of left handedness is not the only thing I have inherited from my father. I have since found my own pair of scissors that I like, and I too am very protective of them and keep them hidden in a drawer.

ooo

My stance on left handed products is somewhat contradictory. I greatly appreciate some such products, like lefty guitars, fishing poles, baseball gloves, and of course, scissors. But at the same time, I think it is almost better for us to be forced to adapt than to make a large variety of products that 90% of the population can't use. For example, in college classrooms, there are often one or two left sided desks. Everyone hates these desks, and most of the time they remain empty. Even I do not like the left handed desks. I have grown so accustomed to sitting in the normal desks and writing with my left arm hovering in the air, that the left handed desks feel weird to me too. And what about those left handed keyboards? Learning to adapt to a standard keyboard would be so much easier than carrying a special left handed keyboard around everywhere you go so that you can do things in your own special way. The idea of carrying a keyboard into the school library or a computer lab seems rather excessive. If the computer labs were required to have a left handed workstation available, it would be a great waste of money. Right handed people wouldn't use it. I wouldn't use it. I think some products are good, but others end up handi-capping us even further.

ooo

All polar bears are left handed.

ooo

I find it interesting to read the theories of the origins of hand preference, but in reality, it doesn't matter to me that much. I am left handed regardless of the reason why, and that is not going to change. I get along just fine from day to day in this largely right handed world. When things get tough, I consider it a chance to innovate and find my own left handed solutions. For instance, if I find myself in a situation where I need to cut something with a pair of scissors that I can't snip with, I have found that I can use the sharp tip of one of the blades in a knife-like fashion and make incisions in that way. And I can run those pesky dangling threads across the edge of the blade in order to mend an article of clothing. In such a case, if you were to ask me how I was doing, I'd say that I was doing "All Right."

NOTES

1 "Left Handed." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. Nov. 2005 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>.

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3 Left Handed Pencils. The Pencil Place. Nov. 2005 <http://www.the-pencil-place.freereserve.co.uk/pen_left.htm>.

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5 "Left Handed." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. Nov. 2005 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>.

6 "Left Handed." Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. Nov. 2005 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page>.

7 Holer, M.K. Famous Left Handers. Nov. 2005 <<http://www.indiana.edu/~primate/left.html>>.

She stands up on the boat,
calling out to me with a smile,
waving her hand,
and I think I see the gentle shift
of wings
behind her, but surely it was just
the water catching the sunlight;
the wake of the boat
following the movement
of her body
across the lake.

**HOME ECONOMICS:
EDUCATION OF A YOUNG GIRL**

miranda pultz

i.

My mother takes the burnt bread,
the smallest piece,
and the bruised pear –
eats them last
standing over the kitchen sink.

ii.

“No ding-ding without
a wedding ring” we sang
in chorus to our mothers
as we posed in second-hand
prom dresses in late April.

iii.

There are fifty-four shades
of Maybelline lipstick
and only five will make you sexy
but not slutty and none of them
will make a boy remember your name.

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graduate fiction award	DAYLIGHT SAVING stacy platnico
undergraduate fiction award	LIVING, AT LEAST robert hindaliter
graduate poetry award	UNDER VEILS aisha sharif
undergraduate poetry award	MY FATHER'S HANDS shanna hajek
graduate non-fiction award	DIRTBAGS jen kocher
undergraduate non-fiction award	LEFT-HANDED SCISSORS lucas millican

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