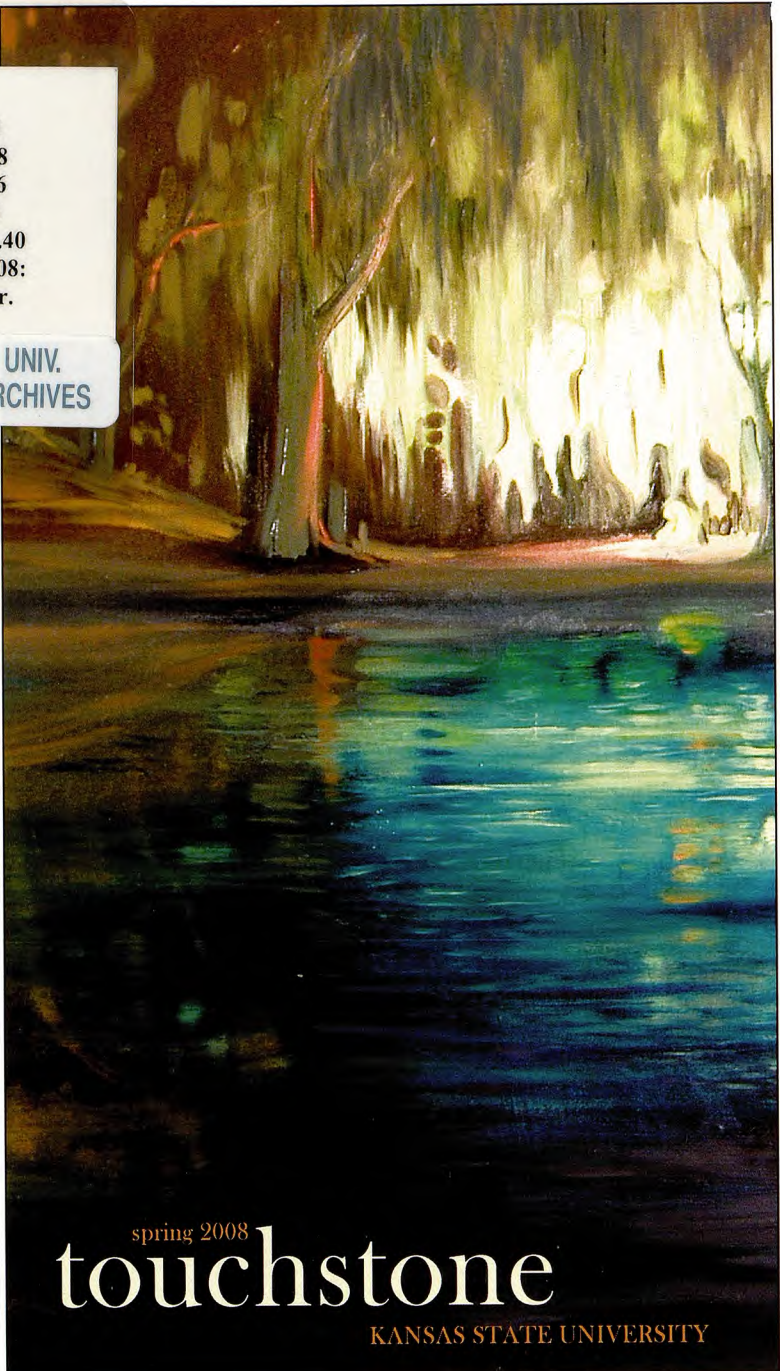


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KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

touchstone

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EDITOR'S NOTE

david
murphy

In the introduction to *The Best American Short Stories 2007*, the guest editor, Stephen King, wrote that, “The American short story is alive and well,” and then King continued throughout his intro to make his point that the short story is alive, but that it is not actually doing so well. He argued that because the short story is doing poorly financially, the short story is dying. In 1820, Thomas Peacock wrote in “The Four Ages of Poetry” that poetry was a dying art, that poets wrote mostly chaff, and that the ‘golden age’ of poetry (Homer’s age) was the only period really worth reading.

At **TOUCHSTONE**, during every stage of the editing process, I’ve had staff members (without any pay) spend their extra hours reading submissions, managing submissions, laying out the magazine, copy editing, etc. All the tasks which needed to be done to create the journal were done by people who were in the heart of their studies with no time to spare and no disposable income. These staff members could have been working for extra money or studying or doing something more suited to our society, a society which values quantifiable results.

My staff worked on **TOUCHSTONE** for different reasons, of course—some to get their name in the magazine, others to have experience with publishing, some because I asked them to, others who needed to express internal creativity, etc. These different reasons are legitimate because artistic work needs support from many directions if it is to flourish. As to what King has said—that the American short story is not doing well—I argue that King is privileging the utilitarian. Charlie Baxter says in his **TOUCHSTONE** interview that Americans are pragmatic and (outside the fiery artistic/cultural hearths of a few major cities) writers will typically seem peculiar if they’re not making money. I now add that it is true that writing short stories will not pay the bills.

Yet, I think that the American arts are in no danger. People desire to have some sort of control over their spaces and their lives—a concern as fundamental as sex and shelter—and two of the manifestations of this desire are poetry and story-telling, which are artistic modes of expression, education, and entertainment. Poetry and story-telling can not be stamped out. So, to me, the only threat to the American short story is increased deprivation of an author’s financial incentives. (And even this threat is humorous: What next, they’ll take away my contributor’s copies?) The rest of it—the art of telling the story, the raw need to express, etc.—will survive no matter what economics dictate. They will survive because they are essential to our being as humans. The arts are innate. Even if, in some crazy apocalyptic scenario, the universities and journals and publishing houses came down, there would be no need to fear for the poem, for the short story, or for our ability to create. The arts can’t die.

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02:10:31

kevin
brown

“Pause the tape just right, just a second before the plane hits,” Jeff says, staring at the screen, “and think of all those people you save.” Taking a shot of bourbon, it dribbling down his chin, down the front of his shirt, he says, “Freeze it just right, and you still got the towers.”

He pours another shot, his hand shaking the bottle into a blur, sloshing liquor on the floor. Everything he says, it echoes through the empty house. Bounces off the bare walls. His wife, Pam, she took everything. The couches and tables. Beds and dressers.

Their daughter’s toys and clothes.

All that’s left, just deep ruts and grooves in the hardwood floors. Sheet-rock with nail holes like bullet wounds. A couple lawn chairs, his mini TV. The Mickey Mouse VCR.

And the tape.

Me, I’m sitting in a foldout, finger-nailing the label off a sweating beer. I’m turning it in my hand, looking at the ceiling, at the window, the stairs and door. Anything to keep from looking at what’s happening on the screen. What happens, what’s about to happen, about to start everything that ends with us sitting here in this gutted house, I’ve already seen. Live and unedited.

And I don’t want to see it again.

“Stop the Zapruder tape at frame 207,” he says, “you change history.”

“Why you doing this to yourself?” I say.

Not breaking his trance on the screen, he says, “Take his brother.” He says, “You freeze him at the podium, and he’s not gunned down in that kitchen.” Downing the shot, he says, “He’d always be ‘off to Chicago.’”

My eyes cut to the television, then away. Back to the television.

On it, framed in the 14" x 21" screen, is a shaking mini birthday party. There's a mini clown in the background twisting red balloons into a tiny poodle. There are kids zipping by in front of the camera with party hats cocked to the side. Adults in lawn chairs, the same we're sitting in now, relaxing in the shade of a cypress, legs hooked over their knees, waving. A picnic table, it's lined with paper plates and plastic forks and presents leaning-towered at the end.

Everything formatted to fit your screen.

The cameraman's voice, it says: *Alright, guys.* The camera shaking, the voice says: *Let's all gather around for cake and ice cream.*

Jeff's voice.

The screen says: 01:41:13.

And these scaled-down kids, they swarm together like feeding fish, wild and high-pitched. Parents step behind their sons and daughters, their knees or elbows or half-faces the only thing visible. My hands are reaching from out of frame, rubbing my son's head.

Pam comes on screen holding a large Hello Kitty cake. She sets it in front of their daughter, Dawn, and everyone's singing "Happy Birthday." Jeff's voice loudest next to the camera mic.

Seven candles are flickering.

The song ends and she closes her eyes. Leans over, hooking the dark curls behind her ears. Her cheeks inflate and she blows, the candles going out. Smoke mouse-tailing in the air.

Everyone cheering.

The screen says: 01:47:05.

Taking a drink, his voice gritty, Jeff says, “Then there’s that tightrope walker.” He shakes his head, smiles at the screen. “If you’d just hit the pause button while he’s still on the wire, he doesn’t drop hundreds of feet seconds later.” He says, “He stays up there forever.”

I lean forward, drape my wrists over my knees, and say, “He still drops, just not again.”

On the TV, Jeff’s voice is saying: *Sorry baby. Saying: We didn’t get you anything this year.*

And Dawn cocks her hips to the side, hand on her waist. Hair blowing across her forehead, she’s smiling and wagging her finger.

Daddy Daddy Daddy, she says. *You’re so silly.*

Jeff rewinds the tape, her finger wagging in quick-reverse. Her hips straightening, hand coming off her waist. He hits play and she does it all again.

Daddy Daddy Daddy, she says, and blinking at the screen, Jeff says with her, “You’re *so* silly.”

The screen says: 01:54:26.

I stand and step behind him, my footsteps click clack clicking on the floor. I put my hand on his shoulder, throw my head back, and let the beer bubble against my lips. “All’s I’m saying,” I say, “is video doesn’t stop something from happening.” I squat beside him, stare at the side of his face, and say, “It’s just proof that it *did* happen.”

On screen, Dawn’s peeling back pink wrapping paper. Ripping it high above her head and letting it drop behind her. Then, her eyes go wide, her mouth wider. Pam’s clapping, saying: *Looky there!*

And Jeff's voice says: *What is it?*

Tickle Me Elmo, Dawn says, tugging at the box flaps.

She tears open a Malibu Barbie. She digs into a E-Z Bake oven.

A Hannah Montana Sing-a-long Microphone.

A Mickey Mouse VCR.

And she keeps digging until the tower of gifts is gone.

Then, Jeff's voice says: *One more!*

Dawn's looking around, mouth half-open. A finger to her lips.

Hon, Jeff's voice says. *What's it Mom's got there?* His finger stretches out in front of the camera, pointing toward the house. And Pam steps from around the corner, pushing a Hello Kitty Big Wheel. A large red bow tied across the handlebars.

All the kids, their mouths are dark pits in their faces. My son looks up at me and I smile down. Massage his shoulders before we disappear out of frame, the camera jumping and shaking to follow Dawn running toward the toy, screaming. Arms V'd out.

The screen says: 02:00:05.

Jeff's bouncing his knee in rapid bursts. He sits straight, then leans forward again, elbows on quads. He pours another drink, shoots it, pours another. His knee still bouncing.

I grab another beer from the box. Water bubbled up and slid off the bottle into pucker marks on the floor. "What say we get out of here," I tell him. "Get some dinner."

His knee moving faster, it's vibrating up his torso, bouncing his shoulder and head. He says, "Then there's that treasurer in Pennsylvania. The one that blew the back of his head off on live TV?" He thumb-rubs the Mickey Mouse-eared remote in his hand and says, "With just a click of a button, he lives forever." He smiles at his daughter laughing on screen and says, "Of course the gun'll always be in his mouth, but nothing's without sacrifice."

I shake my head, stare at the screen, and take a sip. What was my wife, she's not in the video. She's not at the party. Not at our house. Where she's at, is in some other family's videos. Smiling and waving into the camera at some other kid's birthday party. "Jeff," I say, "this acting this way, look what all it's cost you." I look around at the nothing in the house and say, "*Look!*" and my voice slaps off all the bare spaces and repeats: *Look!*

He doesn't break his trance.

On the screen, Dawn's walking toward the camera with the giant bow in both hands. She brings it closer to the lens, closer to the lens, until the screen shakes and goes dark. Until only bits of the party can be seen through the loops of ribbon.

Over the dark, the screen says: 02:03:50.

"Video," Jeff says, "is the modern crystal ball." He says, "It's our prophets, our fortune tellers. It lets us see what's gonna happen." He chokes the bottle of liquor and takes a drink. It spills over the corners of his mouth in a frown.

And I say, "It doesn't let us see what's gonna happen." I tell him, "It shows us what's already happened." Taking a sip of beer, I say, "You see the future, but it's in the past."

Jeff smiles, takes a drink, and shakes his head. "The video camera is our fountain of youth," he says. "Don't you see?" he says. "You can

make the old young again.”

I walk over and yank the remote from his hand. He stands and I hit the pause button. On the screen, Dawn is leaning back, her hands on the handlebars of the Hot Wheeler, her hair blown flat behind her.

“Give it,” he says. “I’m not fucking playing.” His jaw pops, his face vibrating. His eyes red-webbed and slicked over.

“See what I’m saying,” I say, pointing at the screen. He looks, and the screen is shaking and twitching, trying to move forward. White lines jerk across the middle of his daughter. “The video wants to keep going,” I tell him. “It has to. That’s what it does.” I take his hand, turn it over, and lay the remote in his palm. He looks at me, water pearly at the bottom of his eyes, zipping down. “Nature,” I say, “has to take its course.”

He closes his fingers over the remote, sits down, and takes a drink. He hits play and his daughter leans forward, her hair dropping back flat. In the video, chain-link fenced next door, is my mini backyard. My son’s bicycle propped against the fence. The doghouse where no dog lived since my wife left. Her withered and sun-baked Forget-me-nots, sagging, they’re lifted and rocked by a breeze. For more years than I’ve got fingers, she groomed that flower garden. Sunbathed on the patio. We hosted barbecues for friends. The camera shaking, kids yelling, I try to rewind our life in my head—we’re not talking, just walking around backwards like erratic moving zombies.

We’re screaming and fighting in reverse. Her not walking away, but backing toward me down the hall. Her hands held up.

We’re making up, then having small disagreements. Everything ending before it begins.

Jeff and Pam, my wife and I, we’re taking food *out* of our mouths. Then, we’re grilling out, the food un-cooking, and watching the kids zip

around in reverse.

We're smiling, watching our son ride his new bike backwards. The dog running beside him, wagging tail first.

We're staring at our backyard for the first time, arms wrapped around each other. Then letting go. Backing inside in quick jerks, our mouths opened and smiling.

I blink and take another drink. On the video, the sky above the party's the color of wet tissue. Clouds clawing over each other. Wind blowing. The camera, it's looking down at Dawn, who's pulled up in front of Jeff's feet. She smiles up, a front tooth missing. Her head cocked to the side.

And Jeff's voice says: *Can I ride?*

And her head still cocked, Dawn closes her eyes, rolls her bottom lip over her top, and says: *You wish, blowfish.*

She peddles in reverse, away from the camera, waving. She stops and starts riding in circles. Her hair lifting. Jeff rewinds the tape and in quick time, she circles counterclockwise. She stops, facing the camera. Rides toward the lens, smiling and waving, and stops at Jeff's feet. Her head cocks. Mouth moving, bottom lip rolled over top unrolling.

Her closed eyes opening.

Jeff hits play and his voice says: *Can I ride?*

A tear rips over his smiling cheekbone and he says with his daughter, "You wish, blowfish."

The screen says: 02:08:49.

I sit beside him. Swallowing in quick bursts, my eyes sting. My face

hurts. Tightens like a clinched fist. “Turn it off,” I tell him. “For me?”

“With video,” he says, his voice skipping, “you got the power to bring people back to life.” He says, “Just by pressing a button—they’re dead, then they’re alive.” He spider-crawls his fingers over his head, rubs it hard back and forth, and slips it out, his hair standing up. He says, “Like an electronic God.”

He knuckles his eye and tells me with the right timing, you can stop the *Challenger* from exploding. He says, “That teacher’ll never make it to space, but she won’t *not* make it, either.”

The screen says: 02:09:21.

His voice shaking, he says, “You can stop bombs from hitting”

You can see your father again.

Remove cancer.

Reverse AIDS.

Barely audible, he says, “You can single fingerly control fate.”

On the video, Dawn is still riding in circles. Her voice getting louder with each loop. The screen says: 2:10:10.

:13.

:15.

The clouds shifting, thunderheads ripping inside them, Dawn is yelling louder. My son chasing her around, his hands Frankensteined out.

:17.

:19.

“Pause Buddy Holly’s plane lifting away,” he says, just breath and shaking voice, “and the music don’t die.”

:21.

:23.

And I put my arm around his neck, pull him toward me. He drops his head to my chest and his shoulders start to tremor and bounce in jerks. And everything’s coming out. I slip the remote from his hand and it’s smeared wet. I look at our yard, shaking in the background. Everything dark and dead or dying. I know video doesn’t show the future. It can’t make divorced couples married. Make sick people well. Make dead people alive.

You wish, blowfish, I think.

I squint and my eyes are bubbled slits. The TV blurry and wavering. On the video, Dawn finishes her loops and takes off down the driveway, toward the street. Pedaling hard, the grinding sound of plastic wheels over pavement.

And I hit the pause button, catching a voice in mid-yell. Camera in mid-shake. Freezing Pam in the middle of standing. Stopping Dawn from peddling away forever.

The screen twitching and jerking, trying to move forward.

“It don’t die,” he says, screaming into my chest.

“It don’t die,” I say, and squeeze him tighter.

ooo

LEONA

jimbo
ivy

Leona made angels in the snow, of the snow.
Hot faced, she regarded me with eyes azules,
a perfectly still gaze,
arresting the flurry and flutter of the January morning.

I, of course, did not stop, but trudged on, all briefcase and busy,
finding innocuous points of interest upon which to fixate,
leaving her in my periphery,
staring,
and then behind:

A warm dream on a cold, cold day.

The bravest of the brave, I turn back for one last look.

BAM!

Cold stinging, icy fist at my cheek.

Beyond, Leona stands laughing,
she settles,
the last giggle loud and pointing.
Then she stares again, inviting, and so warm underneath.

She's so used to getting exactly
what she wants;

Is it poetry or pride that makes me nod, wipe my face, turn, and let her
stare?

Neither.

Cowardice.

Leona made angels in the snow, of the snow; I did not.

MATURING

jerrod

bohn

Bigger boys chose me to learn
grown-up secrets. Don't tell
your parents, they said, taking turns

flicking my head, hollow
pops echoing. They punched

purple stains into my arm, twisted
Indian burns until I promised
my lips would stay closed, stitched

shut like last week's cut
scarring my chin. See this, spit

a boy in torn Wranglers, this is cuss
word king, worser than anything
shown on TV. Laughing boys grew

silent, fell to whispers, breaths,
left. I walked in late from recess

silent for excuse, and spent
storytime speechless. Talking
cats seemed too cute, beneath

adult gestures my father left
unused by even my grandfather

kicking and drunk-swearing
empty tractors. My pen, too, sat
muted, circumcised from flower-

stickered poems, hugs, bright
smiles. Dozens of stick-figure eyes

watched me run, raising
my middle fingers before I shook
rage into my teacher's arms.

DRIFT 1

brianna
mishler



GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

heather
farris

I.

For my first Christmas in memory
Santa Claus brought me the chickenpox.
So as my cousins played with their Barbies and racecars
I lay on the couch
Staring blankly at the glow of an electric elf.

II.

My mommy took me to the mall where Santa lived
So I could tell him what I wanted for Christmas.
My best friend came too.
We were both so small we could share Santa's lap
Blonde on one knee, brunette on the other.
As she prattled off the endless list of toys she needed
She forgot to mention the Easy-Bake Oven
So I started to tell Santa for her
And Santa told me to be quiet.

III.

I was eight when St. Nick stopped coming down the chimney
And Mom started to put the presents under the tree.
The card thanking me for the cookies and milk
Now came in her handwriting
But still said, "Love, Santa."

NOVENA TO ST. RITA

jerrod
bohn

New Eden State Pen. tried to swallow four
generations of Powers boys, bourbon
breaths who took out bread-line bitter
fists and battered stray dogs, strayed-on

wives. They wore purple shirts and swore blood
oaths that they'd kill whomever told.
That's why the alley dogs didn't bark
bad news around my home. New Eden

settled for the Powers girl, lone daughter
birthed at her mother's expense. She grew
dirty—tried to stick a wood chip
inside her piss-stained dress—and spent

recess playing house, alone, in the tire.
High school heaved rumors and her
home to her brother's arms, tender
unless he'd been drinking afternoons

cursing mutt-stained rooms. One day,
a mangy stray growled from the paint-chipped
trailer that vomited her brother, fists
clenching knife wounds. I heard howls

resound through streets, alerting
neighbors and police to the body
sprawled bloody and the bruised, naked
Powers girl rinsing her legs in water

rusting from the spigot. Once-muted dogs
barked through my overgrown yard,
my boarded-window home, yelping
St. Rita Powers, pray for me.

LISTS

moira
niebauer

hot air balloons
kickballs
soccer balls
basketballs
tires
regular balloons

I am not a good mother. When a good mother loses her child on a beach half way across the country her palms sweat. Her knees buckle. Her muscles tighten. Her heart stops, then remembers the task at hand and begins to work double-time. Her mind closes down except for one simple thing: find my child.

But standing outside a gift shop on a windy beach in Michigan, these were not my immediate reactions when my husband and I found each other and realized that neither of us had Davis.

To others, I must seem like a good dedicated mother, but in that instant when I saw Myles there without him, when my brain was unsuccessfully trying to send messages of panic to the rest of my body, my heart relaxed, relieved.

ooo

chicken pot pies
closed doors
clay pots
caves
crooks
closets
cherries
capes

I've been picking up lists for three and a half years from every table in

my house. Each one neatly arranged with the things around it, each one scribbled furiously, each one without a title. Myles tried throwing them away once, but my son, their creator, only fished them out of the trash, made me teach him how to use the iron, and rearranged them neatly on the kitchen table. I bought a binder and a hole-puncher so Davis could organize them however he liked. We're working on the third binder now.

Davis keeps paper with him always, crunching in his pockets, rubbing against his Bic #2 pencil with .7 mm lead.

Myles thinks the lists are random compilings of things Davis sees, hears, thinks. *No thought to them at all*, he says. *Like jazz*, trying to downplay his obvious insult. Myles is a music professor, and jazz is his specialty, his obsession. I think they're nothing like the jazz that constantly streams from Myles' office, and more like a symphony, each note planned, calculated, obsessed over. Sometimes the patterns of the lists are clear – *things mom touches in the kitchen*, *movies starring Dustin Hoffman* (after seeing *Hook* he became obsessed, entranced by the way one man could be all those different people)– while others leave me wishing I could step into the categorized, alphabetized shelves of his mind, to know him wholly and truly.

Davis taught himself to read at three and a half. The doctors reminded us that there was no way to tell if he was actually reading since he still was not speaking. But Davis looked at those books with such intensity that I knew he could not just be admiring the pictures. At four, Davis could write. With writing, finally, came words. *He's just taking his time*, friends had reassured. *Common problem these days*. *Too many distractions*, his speech therapist had preached. But with the writing came the lists, and with the lists came the words. As if he had been building those lists up for four years, until his head was so full that if he tried to move anything to allow words to come out, all of his organized lists would come crashing down.

With words, we thought we could finally be a normal family. So Myles

convinced himself and the rest of us that we were. Davis was finally speaking, repeating words and phrases, and he could write – not only were we normal, we had a genius son.

Twinkle twinkle little star
Chopsticks
Mary had a little lamb
Peter Peter pumpkin eater
London bridges
Hot cross buns
Jack and Jill
There's a hole in the bucket

Myles always wanted a daughter, so as soon as we found out I was pregnant for the second time, when Davis was two years old, Myles started calling our unborn child his “lucky penny.” Davis still wasn’t talking and didn’t show any interest in the instruments Myles surrounded him with, so Myles looked to our next child to be his musical prodigy. Myles’ favorite tagline used to be *If it wasn't for my bad luck, I'd have no luck at all!* But after Penny was born Myles decided to take a new, optimistic outlook on life, most likely blaming Davis’ problems on his bad karma.

When Davis started talking, Myles decided that Davis must be a savant, hiding some grand musical talent on one of the deepest shelves of his mind. So Myles sat Davis at the piano with him, pressed his little fingers on the keys. Davis sounded out the *Yamaha* printed above the keys and repeated the lyrics to “Peter Pumpkin Eater,” pulling his tiny hands away from his father’s grip.

He's still young, I whispered to Myles. *At least he can remember the lyrics.* Myles almost scowled and then remembered his optimism. *There's always Penny!* I smiled loosely at Myles and turned to ask Davis to recite the lyrics to *Jack and Jill* for me.

needles
pens

heart listener
reflex tester
sucker sticks
pencils

Davis fascinated doctors. It was clear that he was different, and all the doctors came to the same conclusion, but there were little things about Davis that didn't fit into their diagnosis, like his ability to write, his obsession with words, his tolerance of physical touch. It was like Davis knew that he was different, but that wasn't enough. He had to be different than all the other people who were different.

When people first met Davis, they often would not see him as anything but a healthy, normal little boy. He was quiet, but knew the polite thing to say. Sometimes I wonder if he understands what it means to thank someone or ask to be excused from the table, if I have raised a little robot instead of a gentleman, if one day I will find laying on my coffee table a list invisibly titled *things mom makes me say that mean nothing at all*:

please
thank you
you're welcome
may I please be excused
how are you?
I love you

I would never wish it upon another mother to have a child with whom you cannot tell if he understands what a mother is, or if he even knows what it means to love.

ooo

mix
stir
combine
unite

blend
join

On that beach in the very next instant, my brain finally got through to the rest of my body and the panic set in. Myles and I began hurling accusations back and forth, pushing to the side the fact that our son need to be found no matter who was at fault. *I thought you took him to look at shells with Penny!* I whispered harshly. *He was standing right behind you when I left,* he scoffed. *We need to stop arguing or we'll upset Penny,* he said, nodding toward our toddler whom he held in his arms, still placing no emphasis on finding Davis.

I stormed back into the gift shop, leaving Myles outside whispering to Penny. I sped past every clothes rack and plastic bin filled with stuffed animals but found Davis nowhere. Outside, Myles had walked all the way around the gift shop and visitor information center but still no Davis. We turned to scan the vast beach, and my mind went blank. I couldn't picture what Davis was wearing. I couldn't recall my son's face.

There! I followed the direction of Myles' pointed finger and saw a little boy sitting near the water, most likely creating a list. Davis got up and began wandering along the shoreline where the water crept close but never touched exposed toes.

I feared looking into Myles' eyes, ashamed that he had found Davis and not me, afraid that he was wondering how a mother could not feel when her own child is gone, scared that he knew I had lost my maternal instinct. But when I raised my eyes to his, they were met with a wink.

I hurried down to the water's edge as Myles basked in the glory of his good luck and congratulated Penny on helping to find her big brother, and as Davis was stepping on the bridge of a four-year-old's carefully constructed moat. I stopped to apologize to the mother, while Davis marched on, not noticing the bridge or his mother lingering a few feet behind. I turned back and waved to Myles, then began silently following Davis, carefully placing my feet into his footprints, concentrating on

each curve and crevice he impressed in the sand, trying to feel Davis' shadow, to know what only he knew. For thirty-five minutes Davis and I walked like this. Davis stopped only once to scribble a list, never realizing that he hadn't passed another person in over twenty minutes.

Abruptly, Davis stopped as if the train had reached his destination, and this was the end of his journey. He had gone far enough. He slowly turned around, examining the sand and the set of footprints that sat directly behind him. His eyes did not widen with the terror of being alone on a strange beach, nor did they search frantically for his parents. He began walking back, staring at each imprint as if he was trying to figure out who had made them, until his eyes reached my feet, about thirty prints in. My son looked up at my face with a vague familiarity, as though many years ago in our youth we had shared a secret, now long forgotten. He blinked and moved on to the next set of footprints, which, to him, inexplicably grew bigger after he passed me.

The sun was dipping quickly into the distant waves, burning the sky red and orange. I jogged to catch up to Davis and slipped my hand around his. He held on dutifully, but remained absorbed in the mysterious footprints. I wanted to explain to him that I had stepped in each of his footprints, blending my prints into his, to show him that he was mine and we were connected, but he kept his eyes on the sand, and I instead began mentally forming a list of things I needed to do once we were home.

ooo

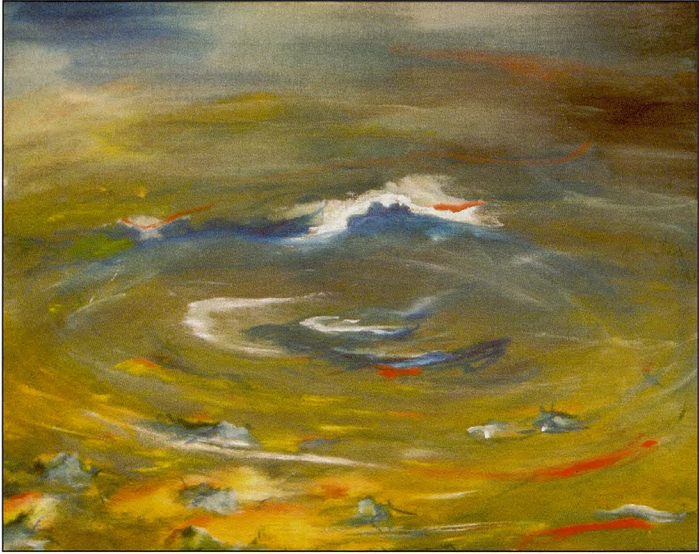
WINDOW WASHER AT NOON

ericka
brunson

Prestigious black women smoke cigarettes, too;
Exhaling the smoke unto the top button
of their navy blue blazers.
It's conflicting, I've found,
being a window washer at noon.
Polishing the windows in the 12 o'clock rain-
Until I can see those women put out their cigarettes
And pull at the run in their stockings.
They will open their umbrellas
And keep on walking.
And I will keep on washing.
Until the concrete becomes a mirror,
And we watch ourselves drown.

PUDDLE 1

brianna
mishler



CLOSING THE STORE ON SUMMER NIGHTS

dennis
etzel, jr.

The closing hour turns to cleaning, turns to
leaving at two in the morning, as night
employees stretch out on the grass, beside
their parked cars, as the automatic lights
shut off, like they are told to do, commands
given by the manager. Each body
turns to the stars, each wish to find a way
out of this job. The hands that touched burgers,
that wrapped wrappers and fixed cold drinks now smell
of grease and French fries, now dig to replace
those gross scents with grass and flower petals,
fingers pushing deeper into the earth.

OPERA

emily h.
freeman

What I remember best is the enormous canvas and metal device in her bathroom, used for lifting her in and out of the bathtub. I was very young and with my sister, mother and grandmother, three generations of us visiting my great-aunt Winnie in her apartment in the Dakota Building on Central Park West. Aunt Winnie gave us old-fashioned wind-up toys to play with while the adults talked: chattering teeth and a small roadster that zipped across the wooden floor of her living room and disappeared under the sofa. Even as children we (and it's always "we," as my older sister and I are in my memories inseparable, a team of two bound together by a mere sixteen months and a shared way in which we experienced the vicissitudes of familial attention and affection) knew that she was paralyzed, knew that this meant she couldn't walk, that she sat in a wheelchair, a limp but nonetheless formidable presence. But our curiosity never reached much below the surface. We never considered what this meant for her psychologically, economically, or as a woman. We never thought about it in those terms that years later our college-educated minds would find impossible not to take in account.

My great-aunt Winifred Cecil was a celebrated soprano who sang at La Scala in Milan. Born in Staten Island, she became an Italian baroness, until the Baron's death left her widowed and -- because she wasn't a blood relation -- without an inheritance. In her later years she was wheelchair-bound, though I remain unclear as to whether this was owing to a car accident, MS, or some combination of the two. I have a record of her performing twelve arias with solo piano accompaniment, an album which I listen to over and over again, as though if I listen hard enough through the static and the years I'll be able to somehow know her. To this end, I have also collected family photographs and family memories, an envelope full of old letters and documents, some in Italian, some in Aunt Winnie's own looping fountain pen hand.

The documents include a ten-page letter written home to her mother in New York during the Allied bombing of Turin; playbills and fliers

covered with glowing reviews from the New York papers; a brown and brittle clipping of Eleanor Roosevelt's syndicated "My Day" column from 1937, in which she writes of my great-aunt having given an after-dinner performance to her and Mr. Roosevelt. This last item intrigues me in particular, as I can only imagine what my grandfather, Winifred's brother, must have made of his sister's performance for a man whose views and policies he found execrable. He believed FDR's attempts to narrow the country's economic gap to be the first footfalls in the march towards socialism and lamented the loss of protection he and his ilk had enjoyed before they put "that cripple in the White House."

My interest in opera, developed at a young age, constitutes the very cornerstone of my search, the entirety perhaps of my reason for being so intrigued with an old relative whom I hardly knew. I'm not trying to point to myself as having been a precocious child with anachronistic taste. Truthfully, though, the environment in which I grew up lent itself to outmoded ways and interests, resembling more closely as it did the one in which my mother grew up than those of most of my friends. And in many ways it *was* the one in which my mother grew up: the same furniture and art, books and records, and often the same conversations and dysfunction. We lived in my grandmother's house and it was she, perhaps more so than my mother, who consciously and unconsciously shaped my predilections and worldview. She would read to my sister and me from the onion-skinned pages of the *Home Book of Verse*, morbid nineteenth-century poems about murder and shipwrecks, insanity and suicide, insisting that we memorize certain passages. At a young age I could recite the first four stanzas of Poe's "The Raven", and my sister could get nearly all the way through Alfred Noyes' "The Highwayman" without missing a word. Noyes was still alive when the book was published, a blank space left at the end of the poem for the year of his death.

In the living room, my grandmother played the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan on her record player, a hulking machine with storage space for albums down below, and an arm that would magically lift the record and flip sides when the time came. In the kitchen, the radio was forever

tuned to a certain classical station from New York City, just forty miles to the south. On Saturdays it broadcast live performances from the Metropolitan Opera, where my Aunt Winnie was scheduled to debut, until the outbreak of WWII prevented her from returning from Italy. My mother received a newsletter-cum-schedule from this station each month, something that as a child I found fascinating, subverting as it did my idea of the randomness of radio, eliminating the surprise at what might come on next. Looking at the newsletter was like finding out lottery numbers before they were announced, or the results of a horse race that had yet to be run.

My mother listened to music constantly, housing her record collection in long wooden shelves that ran along the wall of an enormous room at one end of our house, built as an addition by the previous owners. We called it the Big Room, at first for want of anything better to call it (there was already an obvious living room, and the word “den” was out of the question); and then, simply because it stuck, the emphasis eventually moving to the first word, so that it sounded less like a room defined by its size than a room which existed to accommodate bigness. The *Big Room*. The room had been built to house trophies, and when we’d first visited its walls were covered with mounted animal heads and antler sets. In the corner near the fireplace, where we would eventually put a t.v., a huge bear reared up on two legs with a terrifying scowl on its face. My sister and I were young, and afraid to walk beneath it, as though it might spring to life and devour us. Or maybe this is just what she thought and I just followed suit, as younger sisters do.

The Big Room had huge wooden beams that ran below its vaulted ceiling, from which I remember one of my mother’s particularly hale and fun-loving boyfriends once hanging by his arms, his legs dangling several feet off the floor. I don’t remember if he was showing off for her, or for her slightly skeptical daughters, the two of us undoubtedly thinking how different this man was from our father, whom we’d never known to be particularly active, despite his stories of being on the swim team in college and running outrageous distances when he was first getting sober. My father was older than most of our friends’ parents, forty

when my sister was born, with another set of children and an ex-wife whom we heard of like characters from a story: just names with no real-life referent.

Bookshelves lined an entire wall in the Big Room, rising nearly to the ceiling. Perfect foot- and hand-holds could be created by strategically pushing in a few books' spines on each shelf. In this way we would climb up to the top, to sit among the oil paintings of cock-fights that my grandfather had collected. Despite all of the other household rules (don't contradict your elders, don't put your elbows on the table, don't interrupt) we were never discouraged from, or perhaps never noticed, climbing high onto the tops of things: the refrigerator, the bookshelves, the roof of our split-level ranch from which we could watch my grandmother moving slowly through the gardens, knocking Japanese beetles off of her roses and into a can full of kerosene.

My mother's record collection was well organized by genre, and somewhere tucked within the huge section devoted to classical and opera was the aforementioned record of my Aunt Winnie's arias. Centered in a plain white cover is a black and white photograph of her big moonlike face. She appears neither unhappy nor particularly thrilled, affecting instead a kind of in-between look that someone along the way must have taught to her – a professionally jaded expression, alerting the viewer to the fact that while she may on some level appreciate your listening to her record, she won't lose any sleep if you don't. I have no memories of my mother ever playing the record. Later, after my grandmother died and we sold the house, I came home and packed up boxes and boxes of my mother's records to haul back to college with me. After several years and several apartments, I realized I moved them more than I played them, and I gave them all away, hoping as I lifted the heavy milk crates from the back of my car that someone would love them as much as my mother had. But I kept Aunt Winnie's record, even as I donated my record player.

My great-aunt notwithstanding, ours is a family that appreciates music, but isn't actively engaged in its creation. I took piano lessons for several

years, toiling away in frustration at a battered old Steinway in the Big Room, the same piano that my mother and her siblings had played. Its surface had long since lost its luster, and a few of the ivory keys had popped off and were lost in the mess of the kitchen utility drawer, rattling around with screwdrivers, paper clips, and lengths of string wrapped around pencils too short to write with anymore. The ivory of the keys called to mind the room's previous function, and though my sister and I understood that ivory "came from elephants," it was hard to grasp the connection of these tiny flat rectangles to something so huge and mythical as an elephant, to Babar, whom we read about in ancient children's books with crumbling bindings, one of the copies of which was in French.

One night I climbed the Big Room bookshelves with a spool of black thread which had been thrown over the beams and tied to a hank of my sister's hair. She invited my grandmother into the room to listen to her play the piano, and as she banged away at the *Merry Farmer*, I tugged on the thread so that her hair jumped and danced in time with the music. We'd dimmed the lights in order to hide both the thread and to my presence on the top of the bookshelves, and I'm not sure that my grandmother could even see what was going on. Or, perhaps more likely, she saw the whole thing, and just gamely played along. I tell my husband this story and he just stares at me. As an only child it makes no sense to him, these absurd games that siblings devise, with no apparent purpose beyond impressing one another.

When I was in high school, my mother purchased a series of tickets to the New York City Opera for the two of us. She picked out five operas that she thought I might enjoy, and bought albums of the highlights, if she didn't already own them, for me to listen to and familiarize myself with in the weeks leading up to the performances. *La Bohème* was one, as well as *La Traviata*, *Tosca* and *Mme. Butterfly*. I remember I forsook my attendance at *Turandot* to attend a concert of a band whose identity I can no longer even remember. My mother attended without me, bringing a man she worked with, a man much younger than she with reddish hair and a face like a frog who, as she told it, was completely in love

with her. Perhaps no more dedicated than I to these “higher arts,” they left *Turandot* early, even before hearing *Nessun Dorma*, everyone’s favorite tenor aria and popular highlight of the opera.

We took a friend of mine with us to *La Traviata*, a girl who at sixteen had been smoking cigarettes for several years, a girl of whom my grandmother might have muttered after a few drinks, N.O.C.D. – *not our class, dear*. The girl’s mother had fallen off a horse as a child and lost her sense of smell, making her daughter’s adolescent vice that much easier to hide. At the intermission, my mother bought us a pack of Marlboro Lights at the bar, and we stood on the balcony and my friend and I smoked, looking down over the plaza and the fountain. In my memory, it had rained, and the ground was slick with reflections of the city night. I imagine my mother feeling a certain noblesse oblige towards this girl, this hardened teenage smoker who was no doubt anxiously trying to fit in and act as though this weren’t such a departure from an average Saturday night in her family. I was well attuned to this kind of thing, pantomiming the same feigned ease with other friends’ families, in front of the glamorous mothers and the fathers who came home from work in suits, in well-lit clean homes that were always the perfect temperature, with gleaming kitchens and expensive liquor cabinets.

My first trip to the Metropolitan Opera was with a boy from high school, a classmate of mine who’d asked his parents for tickets to *Aida* for the two of us as a graduation present. The boy’s parents joined us at the performance, either because they wanted to attend, or because they didn’t trust their overprotected and delicate son to navigate the train and the subways necessary to move us from the suburbs to Lincoln Center. Or because they didn’t trust me, who, despite my presence in all of their son’s Honors and AP classes, may have been confusing to them, with my combination of high grades and poor attendance; good manners and delinquent older boyfriends.

The performance was predictably tremendous, with sets and costumes the likes of which I’d never seen over across the plaza at the City Opera. It was pouring rain when we got out, and the father drove faster

than he probably should have along the slick highways on the way home. I remember he was angry about something, or maybe just generally angry. I remember my friend repeatedly, though politely, asking his father to slow down, and his father ignoring him. I remember his mother, a sweet woman as delicate as her son, sitting noticeably silent in the passenger seat. These internal machinations of the nuclear family, particularly those of its male constituents, were mysterious and foreign to me, growing up as I had in a household full of women. Even our dogs were always female. In our collection of Barbies, my sister and I had a single Ken doll, naked and headless for as long as we could remember. Within the first few minutes of any round of Barbie play, Ken was quickly dismissed, tossed back into the pile of passed-over clothes and tiny plastic odds and ends. The explanation given for his absence (something we felt obliged to acknowledge within the dolls' conversation) was concise and unwavering: he was on a business trip. As in:

“Where’s Ken?”

“Oh, he’s on a business trip.”

Et voilà.

I’m not sure what we thought a business trip entailed. If our own sporadically-employed father was on a trip, it was at his own behest, driving as he did more than once from New York to California and back again, in an effort to make sense of his repeated attempts at sobriety, parenthood and marriage, only the first two of which he could ever get something close to a handle on. When he took off on these soul-searching journeys in his rusty old Toyota, did my sister and I tell people he’d gone on a business trip? How did we explain this man whom we even then understood to be by turns genius and utterly helpless? For five years he lived in his car, an episode forged into my memory by way of a column he wrote for the New York Times editorial page. Some friend of his had enlarged and mounted it on foam-core board, and I remember it hanging on the wall of whatever curious little rented cottage or apartment he was living in at any given time, eventually warping and

wrinkling, bulging off the wall as though trying to escape.

During my freshman year of college, New York's City Opera touring company came into town for a several-night run of *La Traviata*. I thought for certain I'd be able to find a friend interested in joining me for the performance, and it was at this time that I came to the realization that this was by no means a universally appealing prospect for people of my age. I should have learned this lesson several months before, when I enthusiastically purchased a half dozen tickets to *The Messiah*, quite certain that I wasn't the only one for whom Christmas was inextricably linked with the music of Handel and Tchaikovsky, the only one from a house where *The Messiah* and *The Nutcracker* played in the background as we trimmed the tree or opened presents. I only found two takers, though, my on-and-off boyfriend and his roommate, who arrived visibly stoned and could hardly keep straight faces throughout the performance in the ornate hall. I wound up attending *La Traviata* by myself, taking no less care to dress up than I would had I been lucky enough to have an eager friend, or my mother, at my side. I had cheap student seats in the so-called nose-bleed section, and though I didn't quite know what to do with my hands during the intermissions, when the lights went down and I had Violetta in the crosshairs of my binoculars, all was right with the world.

My reasons for liking opera are many and varied, running the gamut from the aesthetic to the sentimental. I'm a sucker for elaborate costumes and sets, for formulaic romances full of predictable heartbreak and death, for sitting in an enormous room full of well-dressed people rapt by this silly, anachronistic spectacle unfolding on the proscenium. There's a certain element of theatricality that happens in the seats, as well, wherein audience members posture and pose as though they too, like the characters before them, are existing in a different time, or a different class. My interest in opera leaves me feeling perpetually stranded, though, in an uncomfortable middle-ground between the experts and the ignorant. While I can rattle off a list of operas and composers, hum a handful of arias and name some main characters, I can't really tell you much else. I don't know musical terms, and the

most contemporary opera I've ever seen, *Rusalka*, premiered only as late as 1901. I live in a city whose opera company stages world premiers of new works, but I steer clear of them, afraid perhaps I'll get bored if I can't softly tap my feet to at least one big number. I'm loath to own up to my interest in opera in mixed company lest it be perceived as a pretentious affectation, or for fear that someone will ask me a question I can't answer, or drop a reference I don't get.

Growing up, my family didn't always fit into neat little boxes and categories, existing instead in strange liminal states and in-betweens, on borders and peripheries. In the crudest class terms, we had for the last couple of generations been on the quick and slippery decline from upper to middle class, due in part to anti-trust laws, changes in the stock market, all the wrong people marrying in, and the right people dying or turning out to be hopeless alcoholics or gay. We remained nevertheless steeped in ancestral trappings and mannerisms that were fervently upheld, despite seeming increasingly dated and irrelevant. We lived in a wealthy town, but in a modest house which was kept cold and dark in an effort to save money, although there was always an understanding of a financial safety net in place. We attended good colleges right out of high school, with no second thought as to whether or not we would do so, the experience financed entirely by a friend of the family, a Rockefeller, enacting a sort of noblesse oblige that far exceeded my mother's having bought my friend an opera ticket.

In my middle school French class we were given a list of occupations which our teacher safely assumed would apply to our parents. The students who took French were most often children of doctors (*les medecins*), or lawyers (*les avocats*), or "businessmen" (*les hommes d'affaires*), all of which were easily named and identified, in terms familiar to the other students in the class. When it came my turn I would stumble through the fact that my father was a struggling, largely unsuccessful writer, and my mother cleaned houses by day and drove into the city at night to cater and bartend at lavish parties that she should by all rights have been attending. As a child, and perhaps still now, I fixated on the fact that my Aunt Winnie had a life's calling that could be easily described:

an opera singer, *une chanteuse d'opéra*. And while the words may for some have conjured up a Brünnhilde straight out of Bugs Bunny, all blonde braids and horned helmet, it at least conjured up something, a distinct image, a single entry in the index of a foreign language dictionary.

ooo

THE STORY

The story, which I wished to whisper in your ears
condensed in the cup which was on the table
when I was waiting for the flight number 65.

The story, which I wished to whisper in your ears
arched in front of the gate and from underneath it
the passengers entered hastily and carelessly.

The story, which I wished to whisper..
flew into the clouds.
All the way down.

The story, which I wished..
got rounded in the stamp of the passport.

The story, which I ...
was seen with the buildings
through the car's window
heading the other direction.

The story
turned with the key
and entered with me,
alone in the apartment.

The story, which I wished to whisper in your ears.

Winter, 2000

- Dunya Mikhail

Translated, from Arabic, by Natic Faraj

**INTERVIEW WITH DUNYA MIKHAIL, AUTHOR OF
THE WAR WORKS HARD**

lamees
al-athari

***Lamees:** In an article on the Cuirt International Festival of Literature presented by the web site Critical Voices the author states that you are Kurdish and in another article "East of Eden" from the South China Morning Post (12/18/2005) you are included in a list of visiting Muslim writers who "set out to rebalance the skewed view of the Islamic world" (Yenni Kwok). What is your response to that? How do you identify yourself, especially now, after you have become an American?*

Dunya: I am Iraqi Christian, specifically Chaldean. I speak Aramaic with my mother. However, I consider Arabic my native language, since it's the language with which I read and write. Middle Eastern Christians seem to have dual identities. Their culture is influenced by the East and their dreams are influenced by the West. Recently, I earned a hyphen to my identity and became Iraqi-American. To say the truth, I don't really care that much about ethnicity. I have a problem with geography, directions, and borders. Sometimes I feel like I probably fell from another planet. But, oddly enough, I still find the Earth interesting.

How do you describe your own poetry?

My poems usually have some stories behind them, or ideas, but not ideology. The style is ironical sometimes, and the language is simple. In Iraq, colleagues were describing my poetry as subversive.

The culture of the Middle East, in my opinion, is an oral one. You won't usually find people reading in the trains or in waiting places. You see that in Europe with people usually reading novels. In the Middle East, you find people listening to songs, poetry, and to religious preaching or lectures. The Arab nation, I think, is not a visual nation. It's audio. News and gossip transfer through ears from one person to another as quickly as fire. An important feature of the traditional Arabic poetry is the idea that it must be pleasing to the ear. Most of Arabic poetry is written with the intention to be recited aloud. My poetry doesn't have such an intention. Therefore I would like to call my poems (or the modern poems in general) the low-tone poems.

Poetry has been called “the Arabs’ diwan” which means like “the Arabs’ record or point of assembly.” Arab leaders have been always aware that Arabic poetry has a great influence on the opinions of people; therefore, they, especially dictators, pay big awards and money to the poets who glorify them or glorify their deeds, and punish or kill those who criticize them.

As much as I am concerned, poetry has the power of taking me away from or/and into everything. Just like someone in love, I follow it blindly, and my cheeks get hot.

When and why did you choose to translate your work into English?

When I was inside Iraq, I didn’t feel the need for other languages and didn’t feel the need to get my work translated. I was published in the Arabic media, and had full attention from audience, although from “censors” as well. Anyway, it was after I came to the US when I felt the need for translation. My language, my tool of power, became suddenly my barrier. However, having some background with English helped me, to some extent, and helped others, like Elizabeth Winslow, in translating my work.

Who is the audience you are writing for?

I don’t think of a certain audience when I write. I need first to enjoy my writing to expect others to enjoy it. That’s simply my measurement.

Which of your works do you feel is the closest to your heart and why?

“The War Works Hard” is my signature poem. However, I am always excited about my latest work the most.

Traditional Arabic poetry is very lavish and as Saadi Simawe states in his introduc-

tion to *The War Works Hard* that Arabic war poetry employs “slogans and dead metaphors and political clichés” (vii-viii). What made you break from the traditional Arabic (or Iraqi) form of this genre of poetry?

By the way, I would like to say that Saadi Simawe was the first person in the US that paid a real serious attention to my poetry and tried to get the attention of others into it. As for why did I break away from traditional Arabic form, and away from slogans etc., was not that I just wanted to break away. It's because that poetry has nothing to do with those dead metaphors, political clichés or even any definite traditional forms. It's because simply I do write poetry.

Your last work *The War Works Hard* has many references to Western imagery and symbols. As the “Titanic” in “*The Jewel*” (p.20) and the image of a snowman in “*A Drop of Water*” (p.10). I thought that this was due to your living in the States, however I found similar references in your earlier works (i.e. before 1996). As in “*What is the meaning of these poems?*” In *Almost Music* (p.36) you refer to a masking party (“*Halloween Party*”). Also, in the last stanza on page 27 from “*A Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*” you seem to liken Baghdad to *Sleeping Beauty*: “a sleepy princess who waits for the prince’s kiss”. Were you affected by Western life from your days in Iraq?

I wrote “*The Jewel*” after watching *Titanic*, and wrote “*Snow-Storm*” after I was prevented by a snow-storm from attending a celebration. Snowmen and other symbols were popular even in Iraq. The “*Sleeping Beauty*” and other Western symbols, in my previous writings, came, I think, from my readings of translated literature and also from my grandmother. She used to tell me those world folktales every summer night on the roof of our home in Baghdad. How much I yearned to see those stories printed or illustrated in a book, but she used to repeat to me that those were narrated orally from generation to another, reminding me to do the same for my kids.

In *The War Works Hard* you have included some poems from your earlier

collections; why did you not translate the whole of these works also?

I didn't like all of my poems the same. I selected some that were still okay to present. But I know that some readers may like the ones I ignored. I know that because sometimes I get surprised by readers' opinion. They ask me to read some poems that I would not think of reading.

In your earlier works there is always a sense of absence, a person, a feeling, a country...etc, why is that?

You are right. It was present in my life the absence of special people and special things. There was first the absence of my father, then of my lover, then of friends. In the time of war, you miss a country, a shelter. Actually, we, as Iraqis, should claim another life, because we missed it.

Also, there seems to be an urgent need to escape, is this related in any way to the pressure you faced in Iraq because of your work?

I left Iraq in 1995, right after the publication of my "Diary of a Wave outside the Sea." It was a text full of symbols and was critical of both the Iraqi regime and the allied forces. There were times before 1995 when I thought of escaping, but never did. Sometimes not allowed to, and other times thought the need was not that urgent yet. In my poem "The Cup", the dead man answers his woman a one-word answer: "escape", when she asks him what to do.

Most of the Iraqi writers referred to in Miriam Cooke's book, Women and the War Story, portray a certain type of Iraqi soldiers, mothers and lovers that are very patriotic to the point that sacrifice of the self and the other is the only way to be faithful to the country. What made you choose to distance yourself from this type of writing in your earlier works?

A huge amount of Iraqi war literature that was published inside Iraq, especially during the Iraq-Iran war, depicts the Iraqi soldier as a "super-

man.” That doesn’t mean all of that literature was trash, but only few Iraqi writers presented the Iraqi soldier merely as a “human being.” Those few wonderful writers realize that the artistic value of their writing is really what matters at the end. They know that creative writing is not a patriotic society. It should do no favor but to the art itself.

I feel that your work reflects on the experience of war from either a woman’s or a child’s perspective. Why is that?

Well, from a woman’s perspective because that’s who I am. From a child’s perspective because I could not understand the war, could not make a sense of it, could not find convincing answers, could not deal with it.

Did you feel the need to include women and children in your poetry?

Most of Iraqi writers are male, many of whom have been in the battlefield. For them, it was a war with other men who they had to kill or be killed by. As a woman, I could see the war in the streets, in the tears of mothers, in the eyes of birds frightened by bullets, in the holes of the walls and of the helmets of those men returning from the battlefield. However, I am not sure that was out of need for that kind of writing, but because simply that’s my original style of writing. It’s a need for writing in general.

What is the role of the female character in your poetry? Does she have a role or is once again just a bystander?

I never thought of that. But for the sake of your question, let me trace my poems. I find that the woman in my writing have these roles: a prisoner’s mother, a mother carrying her son’s bones, a goddess, a snow-woman, a lover, a fortune-teller, a nun.

Why did you choose this certain form for your poem "O"?

The form of that poem represents its content. It's about an endless movement of things. Specifically, it's about the movement of an ambulance between the emergencies of people.

Who are the Red Mother and the Brown Mother in your poem "To Any Other Place"?

The red mother is the "mother of all battles." The 1991 US-allied war on Iraq was called by the then Iraqi regime as the mother of all battles. The brown mother represents the regular Iraqi mother.

Are you working on something now? Do you have any projects in the near future?

I just finished a memoir book. I am not sure when it's going to be published.

Do you ever think of writing in any other form? Novel? Or short story?

This memoir book that I finished is the first work in prose for me. In the process of writing it, I really missed my poetry writing. I realized something. I feel excited when I write in prose, but it's only when I write poetry my excitement reaches to the peak.

Why war poetry?

Why not war poetry when the war was (and is) all I saw, smelled, and heard.

ooo

HELL POINT

jonathan
hall



LOVE IS A GOOD NIGHT AT THE BARS

kyleigh
payne

Last night I ran through a fountain.
The bottom was covered in broken beer bottles,
but my feet were numbed by rum
and coke.
I was singing my favorite song, I was singing
every song.

But now I'm having second-thoughts.
My good memories have all disappeared,
I can only remember the bar fights and the blood on my
glass-filled feet.
After you bought ten rounds,
we went ten rounds,
and a hollow round of "I love you,"
sent us in different directions down 12th.
Now I'm alone and hung-over,
with someone else beside me.

STATIC: IN THE FORM OF A RED CIRCLE

ericka
brunson

I have forged myself from scraps,
A shredded paper bastard-
Overlapping my fringes
Into the corner of your eyelids.
These are years of disregarded fingertips
They have pasted firmly against your aspirations.
So I have learned to separate myself,
Like a load of laundry, or a loaf of bread---
And I am now completely detached,
A montage of my own accord.
A finger pointed; judgment
 (dead center.)
A red target
At the bottom of your everything.

FROM AN ARTIST'S LETTER TO A YOUNG MAN

allison

branch

I always thought there was something
Magical in the way the paint
Spread across the canvas.
I wondered at the hand that was
Moving the brush effortlessly along,
Until suddenly there was no more room
For blankness.

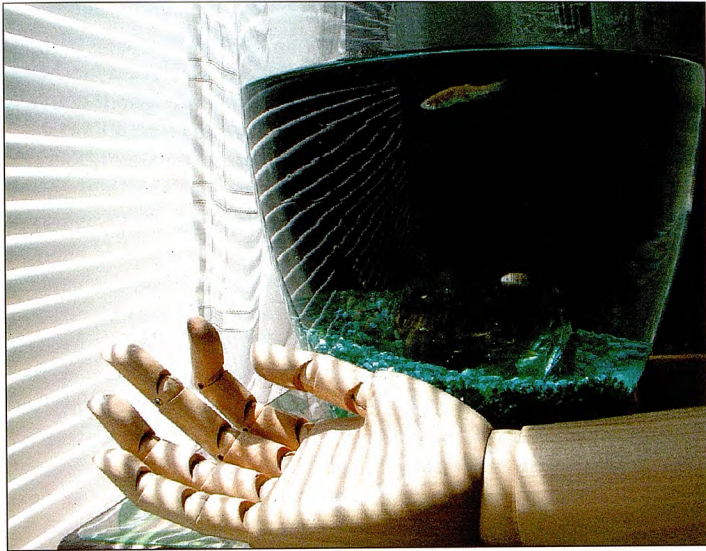
The first time I made a canvas
Stretching the edges taut over wood slats,
The lengthening shadows of afternoon sun
Made the bright white emptiness swell
Into a challenge. But I didn't have the power then
To bend it to the will of my brush.
I hid it in a drawer for a braver time.

I do wish that I could've painted her face just right;
I'd try again and again, to get her to sit still
For a portrait, but she'd just laugh
And the sunlight would hide her from me.
I had to settle for that sideways smirk
She wore on the beach in summer
When we three would play hide and seek
Among the soft ivory dunes.

So, anyway, I'm sorry I told you I lost that painting.
I just needed it to be put in the drawer
For a while, you know, until I knew
I was finally brave enough to see her again.
Take it and put it someplace special;
I hope it will help you remember us both.

TOUCH

katherine
settle



BECOMING BANKSY

sean
conner

“Imagine a city where graffiti wasn’t illegal, a city where everybody could draw wherever they liked. Where every street was awash with a million colours and little phrases. Where standing at a bus stop was never boring” -Banksy

Laying on my bed, top floor of the international student housing, late afternoon, in Puebla, Mexico, I was reading through the pages of a *New Yorker* when I met him. Banksy. He’s a graffiti artist. Not the kind that plasters fluorescent, bubbly-fonted Ebonic phrases throughout slum USA. He’s the other kind, the good kind, the deviant with a fucking purpose kind. Plus, he’s British.

And so (though I realized the painfully ironic situation of discovering said deviant artist in the *Inventors and Innovators* issue of said elitist magazine) I had an itch, a yearning. Feelings that had lain dormant since my high school days of spouting Marxist phrases that Marx never really said or would’ve endorsed peeked out from behind dusty recesses of my brain.

Then I fell to sleep, woke up later, probably made fajitas or soup or rice, and tucked the article away. I laughed at the plausibility of me actually painting something on someone else’s wall.

That’s not to say I didn’t investigate Banksy a bit more. I looked at his website, admired the way he brought art to the streets, but for all intents and purposes, I lost the desire to don my KGB “Still Watching You” t-shirt and spit on the establishment.

Banksy comes from England. Banksy’s real name is officially unknown, but many assume it’s Robert Banks. That name isn’t very menacing. That name is white collar. That name deserves to be painted over.

We are outside, standing in some abandoned parking garage below The Six and Noname’s apartment complex. Garage is a generous word. It’s really just rusted steel i-beams supporting two long strips of corrugated

steel panels. Dark Green I think, though it's night, so I can't really tell. We have a few stencils in hand, the first stencils, along with a several pairs of vinyl gloves and two cans of flat black spray paint.

There is a car parked down there. I ask if it's abandoned. The Six says she thinks so; it hasn't moved in a while. I want to spray something on it, something that will immediately frustrate the person who owns the car, should they ever walk down the broken concrete steps to claim it. But, upon gazing at my deviance, they will realize how brilliant I am, how truthful whatever I choose to spray is, and would lug that car to the local mechanic, have them fix it up, and drive it proudly around town. But I don't know what image could do that, I can't even think of anything clever. We aren't that clever. But we want to be.

There are two stencils and four of us. One stencil is a generic smiley face, quickly cut out just to have something to test out. When cutting it though, The Six had gone a bit wonky with the x-acto, so the smile is sort of twisted into a conical mutation, abstractly approaching the angle and gesture of a camel's chewing lips, lower gum jutting to one side, pulling the whole mouth over with it. The other is one that I cut up, a pinup girl that Noname had converted to a stencil in Photoshop. I lost a lot of the details cutting her out on the file folder, but I think it's still recognizable.

We stand, The Six, Noname, Yeti and I, kind of gawking, shifting our feet, and looking up as the occasional headlights illuminate the leaves above us. I don't know why we're so nervous, we aren't even painting on anything, just planning to practice our stencils in my sketchbook and on other file folders. Nothing illegal about it, yet, we treat everything as though it could be a cop, as if it would signal the arrival of SWAT and through some judicial trickery we would be convicted of pre-meditated pre-vandalism.

So it may have been minutes, probably only seconds, but I eventually put a glove on my left hand, kneel down, and pin the stencil in place over another file folder. Yeti hands me a can of spray paint, and I check

the nozzle to make sure it's pointed away. I hold the can about six inches away from stencil and press lightly. Before this point, I may have used spray paint once or twice in my life. If I did, it wasn't notable or worth remembering, but as the black paint hissed out of the can, I knew this would be. I began to feel elated, as I directed the nozzle further down the stencil, my left hand moving down slowly to hold the stencil firmly in place. And then I hit the bottom, threw another quick run of paint up and down. The hissing of the paint stopped. It had taken five seconds, maybe less. I looked up at the three others, smiled, and lifted the stencil from the folder.

Let's go back. It may seem an odd progression, suddenly seeing me with stencil and spray paint in hand, only a few months after I returned from Mexico. I lied a bit earlier. I didn't passively follow Banksy, I checked his site every day. I told people about him, anyone really. I used him as way to demonstrate my cultural trendiness. While still in Mexico, I asked any British or Europeans I met if they knew of Banksy. None had.

But, I promise, Banksy is big. He has sold prints to Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt. He has tagged London, Paris, New York, L.A. and San Francisco. He's got art books selling in Urban Outfitters nationwide, which is where I got mine, *Wall and Piece*. And I think, again, it's ironic, because Banksy the vandal is being packaged and sold as Banksy the hot commodity.

Banksy has several trademarks. One is the rat. Armies of rats. He stencils them crawling around "No climbing" signs, or has fiendishly large ones grimacing down on busy intersections. He paints Mona Lisa with a rocket launcher, or Buckingham Palace guards spraying anarchy symbols. He puts up official looking city ordinances, which designate certain walls "Official Graffiti Areas," and documents how over the course of a few weeks they go from becoming one large white walled canvas to the home of a wide range of tagging talent.

He's also a prankster. He buys pastoral paintings at the flea market,

stencils in caution tape, security cameras, or attack helicopters, and then sneaks them into museums to hang up. He's struck at the Louvre, The British Museum, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Because I was telling everyone about Banksy, about what he does, one day, in passing, I mentioned it to yet another friend. Sure enough, she'd heard of him, and, in passing, I said it would be cool to vandalize like that. Sure enough, she agreed.

This developed into something quasi-serious. Both of us, along with two other friends, started deciding to meet weekly to plan our vagrancy. It was an intricate process, more intricate than I thought deviance should be. We started our first meeting, wondering exactly how we should go about making stencils. The appeal of stencils is twofold. First, more personally, is the stylistic element. Stencils allow one to turn any image, hand drawn or not, into a possible image to spray on anything. Secondly, stencils allow an image to be created identically over and over, and more importantly, be applied quickly.

Theoretically, creating stencils seems easy. You can trace an image, or draw your own, and then just cut out the parts that paint needs to seep through. At one point in my life I wanted to be a comic book artist, so I'm decent with a pencil. But it doesn't transfer from penciled image to stencil as easily as I hoped. One has to deal with the negative space, and realize that not every line can be cut, or the stencil will be one solid block, lacking any definite details.

With practice, one is able to apply several separate stencils together, creating more complex images, with multiple colors, essentially layering design elements one on top of another. I am not there yet. I haven't even made a single stencil that I think is cool. One day. Maybe.

We settled on file folders as our stencil medium. File folders are stiff enough that the small edges will hold and prevent paint from running, even if there is significant detail. Plus, they are easy to transport, store, and hide, even in the open. The artist is able to walk up to a wall, open

the folder up, spray, and simply fold it closed again. Stick it in a book bag, among other papers, or folders, and they can easily walk away.

This is all theory. I know. This is how we have progressed in our “project.” We talk a whole lot, about what could work, about how we will progress. We know we should start on the outskirts, just spraying old jalopies or those oil pumps that pop up sporadically in cornfields. But we don’t want to start there, that isn’t cool. We want to be seen. We want to be recognized. We want to not only act as deviants, but we want the cops and the government and the C.I.A. to be onto us. Or that’s what we say.

The truth is, for me, that I’m scared shitless to actually go out and tag something. I like sounding like a badass, but I don’t break rules. I didn’t start drinking till college. I’ve only smoked weed once, and I couldn’t tell the difference in the buzz I received via marijuana from the buzz I’ve received smoking hookahs. I come off as one lazy procrastinating smug self-assured pompous prick (okay, not really, maybe just laid-back and lazy), but when I’m alone and in a bind, I get nervous. About the paper I have to write. About getting an A. About taking the appropriate next step in my life. I get uncomfortable in any situation where nobody is talking, and feel like I have to make things better by pointlessly bantering about things that I’m not really interested in. It’s hard for me to be genuine. I will say (and write?) what people want to hear.

Have you ever seen the cover of The Who’s *Who’s Next* Album? It’s got the four band members, Daltrey, Townsend, Entwistle, and Moon, standing around this large stone slab that juts straight out of the ground. It’s in the middle of a wasteland, gray stones running to the horizon. On the slab are four urine stains, and each band member is adjusting their fly. Daltrey, his rock-star blonde locks falling like a lion’s mane, gazes fiercely into the distance. In this moment, he’s untouchable, as his piss runs slowly down the whitewashed wall, as the sound of four zippers break the silence that must be suffocating, as he thinks of the girls from the night before, or the girls that will come. Untouchable.

When I lifted that stencil up from the folder, this is how I felt. Untouchable. There was no statement made, it was just paint on another folder. But intent was there, or if not intent, possibility. That I could turn to the pavement near me, and leave my mark on the world. I've never felt that free and liberated, like a rush of energy or endorphins or something just swells up and your next few breaths are that much more valued, more significant, more noticeable. I was alive.

We went around, each of us spraying one of each stencil. I am not sure if they felt like I did. I didn't want to ask, to ruin my high. The Yeti, after painting each one on a folder, took the pinup stencil and sprayed it on one of the support beams that held up the garage. I could've, I suppose, but this isn't where I wanted to say what I wanted to say. Plus, was a pinup girl really what I wanted to show the world?

The walk back to the apartment might've included conversation. But I don't remember any. I remember the clacking of the ball bearings inside the spray paint cans. I remember holding the stencil in my hands and just staring at it. I remember going back into the apartment, talking a bit, planning our next step (personal stencils). I remember walking with the Yeti back to the car, and wondering if we can keep spray paint cans safely in the car with winter coming on. I remember getting home, walking to my room, grabbing tape, and putting that first stencil up on the wall.

Banksy writes, "Some people become cops because they want to make the world a better place. Some people become vandals because they want to make the world a better *looking* place." I guess that's what I really want to do. I am not political enough, not opinionated enough, and not smart enough to think I can say something witty about the man, and live with myself as I walk into Wal-Mart and buy my groceries.

But, graffiti as public art, art that can stop people and make them think, for even a second, not about what it means politically, but maybe just

how it got there, intrigues me. Maybe they'll laugh, maybe they'll take a second to stop thinking about all the bad shit in all of our lives, and just enjoy this image that was plastered to the pavement in five seconds by another person with all sorts of shit to trudge through. If I can do that, make someone stop and consider and even enjoy their walk between point A and point B, then I'll have done what I want.

And I laugh at the plausibility of me actually painting something on someone else's wall.

ooo

THE OCCUPATIONS OF DATING

austin
tremblay

As serious as a haircut,
with the mystery of an initialed
middle name, I entered your world.

In the dingiest artificial light of day,
the dank of Old Spice stuffing
the back rooms of retail stores and restaurants,
I prepared for you to come and kiss me.

I miss your skin smelling of salads,
your tongue tasting of envelope glue,
all of your smoking or non-smoking questions.

I remember how the sleeves of shirts hugged
themselves in the art of your folding.

The poetry of your inconsistent penmanship,
lines breaking through t's with an incline,
S's like swans, the long neck and then
the undercurve of the belly, with a quick fold
back to make a feather tail. All of this marking
your staccato schedule in half notes on the fridge.

And all I could do was make you pancakes
in the vague shapes of continents, Africa
drifting from the wholeness of batter to form
itself in the frying pan. And at night, serenade
with simple chord progressions, strings
hammering on and off like rain on the roof.

I would see you up on Sundays reading
before breakfast, caught in honey-light,
your burgundy and gray boxers saying, "B. U.,"
and me always thinking, "I am trying, I am..."

PIONEER SPIRIT

tracy
tucker

Afoot one evening and far adrift,
I found a path leading to your door
Or what remained, after a hundred years and more.
Did you cut these limestone blocks,
Once square, now weather-worn and water-pocked?
And what brought you here,
With a wooden steamer packed tight
Full of dreams and a single change of clothes?
And why here,
This windswept bit of a hill
Where the trees hunch under an oppressive south wind
And the ploughed furrows stretch unpausing from dawn to dark?
Was it Turkey Red you brought,
Sowing your seeds and hopes in one pass
To live or lose together?
And which was worth more:
The things you found here, or the things you lost,
Blown away in the south wind?

BLUE RIVER ICE

jonathan
hall



A CELIAC BREAK-UP

allison
branch

This is for you, Enriched Unbleached Wheat Flour.
You and I, we always had such good times
On birthdays, with Mom's homemade chocolate cake,
Or on the weekend, we'd all eat pizza,
And you always tasted so good, so good.
But the cilia, you know, those little hairs
Inside my intestines? Well, they say they're
Tired of being pushed over flat when you
Get down there. They have to get special help
From the Auto-Immune Response – that hurts.
It feels like forks, twirling up inside me
As though my intestines were spaghetti.
You hurt too much. So I'm sorry to say
That you and I, we're done. (But I'll miss you!)

HOG KILLING WEATHER

richard
boada

Sows hooked on the walls of the barn,
hind shanks hung raw, bellies split open,
hearts on sawdust, fetlocks swept up in piles.
We saved their hooves in tin pails, chopped
above the phalanx. Mother jarred
and labeled each season.

Slicing bacon, cleaving hunks of pork
for the grinder, I counted scars on my hands.
Palms up, sawed nicks and bites, scabbed
thumbs, pruned as if long soaked in water.
Those blood stained blades and lips of hooks
clipped hands, again and again, buried me inside
the slaughter, fried on the skillets.

CAMEO

trina

burke

The dragonfly is just a fly, no dragon.
A creature of deceit like you, mother—
No moth, no other. You are the scarab
in my bug menagerie. No use
for the flowers I would bring—
Asphodel and honeysuckle you left
to dry with no drink. You are
the sacerdotal wither that browns
and brittles pistils. For me
cockscrow is no calamity. The call
to wakefulness a relief concealing
the polyphony of knucklebones
throughout our living bedchamber.
Unequivocal farmyard bleating
a welcome invasion and leaden limbs
remain, counting the knot archipelago
in the bedstead wood-grain. I stir,
I reach beneath for your scuffed
patent leather slippers, your age-
latticed parasol and make my first
foray into buzzing daylight.

BIRTH II

brianna
mishler



ANATOMY OF A DYING TOWN

lauren
tipton

“Man meets his fellow here with a hearty greeting, while the good women, as they toil the greater part of the day in looking after the domestic duties, hum a merry tune the while, because every one is cheerful and happy! This is our town- the ideal city of the county,” -The Hubbell Standard Newspaper, *December 13, 1912.*

Some will say that much about the town has changed in the last 100 years. It's true, the town has had its share of adversities, from rapidly declining population to natural disasters, but despite these hardships, those same attitudes seen in the newspaper article still remain.

It was written in 1880 that “Hubbell has bright prospects for the future, as no new town ever possessed any better advantages.” Local newspapers boasted of the ‘mushroom growth’ the town experienced when the population boomed in only 90 days after establishment. At that time, the town consisted of nearly 50 sufficient businesses- a saloon that was known for passing out the window that which couldn't be handed out the door, a school that was the largest in the county, a flourishing flour mill, a fairground and race track, a grain elevator powered by a blind horse, and two banks, one of which was named for the town's founder- Hubbell Johnson. Now, less than a handful of business are left. The only business still remaining is the bank. A sign leading to town is hard evidence of the truth many locals have trouble admitting: Population 55.

This declining population has little effect on one business in town, the 80 Acres Restaurant. The entrance to 80 Acres is located in the middle of a building resembling a Cracker Barrel restaurant, with red tin siding covering the outside. A wooden overhang and pillars frame the entrance. A foyer gives customers the option of picking which side to sit on; most choosing the south side. A long bar sits in the middle, and a friendly bartender greets customers in the evenings; the kitchen is closed off behind the bar, separating the two sides. A menu of specials sits on the south side and customers are able to choose where they want to sit, to maintain a casual atmosphere.

It's 7:30 in the morning and while most people are hustling around in their rush to be at work by 8:00, the crowd at the 80 Acres is just settling down, ready for their morning cup of coffee.

I'm given a warning before I walk in. His name is Mark, and though he doesn't live in Hubbell, he continues to own a machine shop in town. It seems like it would be an inconvenience to drive the ten miles to work each morning, but he considers this town to be his second home, and he is considered one of the locals- arriving around the same time each morning for coffee and gossip. He's dressed in jeans stained with grease and a ratty blue t-shirt. "If more than one woman is there, the tables have to be segregated, but if only one woman is there, it's okay for her to sit with the men." He laughs. "Well, that's my observation." I say that maybe I'll just sit alone. "Don't do that. If you sit by yourself, the women will all be wanting you to go sit with them, and the men will all be buggin' you to go sit with them."

This morning, people are dressed in overalls, caps displaying seed companies, and raggedy heavy coats, but on a weeknight, people will be dressed up for a night out, or just in jeans and a work shirt. The atmosphere is like Cheers, where everybody knows your name. There's no need for introductions, unless you're an outsider and all types are welcome here, though the outsiders may be asked to provide their back-story. Nine men sit crowded around two small tables pushed together, intended to be a seating place for only eight people. I betray the women by taking a seat with the men; they seem like the livelier crowd this morning.

There's no music blaring or colorful TV distractions, though a big screen is conveniently located in the corner. With each person who walks up to the table, a few more cents are placed in a tin can- their contribution to the coffee fund. Every time a person rises to pour another cup of coffee, they serve the entire place. The morning news isn't found in the newspapers; it comes from the mouths of locals. Their conversations are personal, and this morning is no exception, as the dialogue delves into topics such as the \$50 Pat won the other night while

gambling and the statistics about Bob's son from the football game the previous night.

"What the hell is this shit you're wearing?" Bob, the only one willing to blatantly say whatever is on his mind, switches from last night's game to my clothing selection. It had only been a 10 minute drive to coffee, yet I had forgotten that I wasn't in Kansas anymore. I'd crossed the sacred Kansas/Nebraska border, but had forgotten that wearing a KU sweatshirt wouldn't be tolerated since it also happened to be the day of the KU/Nebraska game. I pulled the sweatshirt off, and soon the topic of their conversation turned to predictions for the game.

With each person who walks through the front doors, more room is made at the men's table. Each time, they would scoot closer together or increase the size of the circle, though never adding another table. The more men that joined the group, the more uncomfortable I became, so I left for the ladies' table, which seemed more inviting, warm, welcoming. From the ladies' table, Pat smiles as I join the two women. She's a sharp woman, one who everyone listens to whenever she speaks because, though she says few words, what she says is always important. Few men acknowledge, or seem to notice, my departure.

From afar, the men's table looked more like a group of young boys, each leaning in close and hunched over the table like they're joking about some private subject they don't want their mothers to see or hear. Occasionally they'll glance over at the ladies' table to see if they're listening to the conversation. The ladies sit with arms crossed and their eyebrows raised, trying to seem like they're not listening, but they always are. Most of the time, they feed off the men's conversation to provide topics for their own.

"Diminishing in numbers, but not in excitement." I look over at Pat, her eyes fixed on the men's table. Immediately I know what she's talking about. The declining population has had its effect on the regulars at coffee, and fewer people are taking the place of those who have passed away, but the enthusiasm shown each morning by the regulars never

dwindles.

In 1908, the students of Hubbell High School decided to write a song about the town. It featured verses about people and businesses of the town in a light manner. The song began with: "Hubbell is a quiet little town/ The finest there is for miles around/ The people here are certainly a fright/ The way they do hang out at night."

"You're draggin' this morning." Mark's comment causes the entire place to watch Myron walk through the door toward one of the steaming posts of coffee located on a side counter next to the men. He's an older man and wobbles as he walks, yet this morning's comment causes a smirk to appear across his face and adds a little boost to his step.

"I know," Myron replies.

"Bob workin' ya' too much?"

"No, washin' clothes."

A roar of laughter comes from the men's table. "You're gonna make a good wife some day."

Finally the ladies' table increases in size when a woman rushes in with her large mug, darting for the coffee, then to the women. She plops down in her seat and leans back. "Well, I guess Millie's daughter went out and bought a new vehicle." The other women perk up, it seems to be news to them.

"What'd she get?"

"A Ford truck."

"Why'd she want a truck?"

"I guess she likes it better than a car."

“You know, when her mother got divorced, she nailed him for half of his 401K, three or four hundred thousand.”

“She can’t go out and spend that money. She’ll need it later.”

Agriculture is not just a job here, it is a lifestyle and has been since the town’s inception. Hubbell came into being on what was once a corn-field. A settler of the town in 1880 said, “In this country and being in the best selection of the agricultural country of the West and possessing as it does the advantage of a splendid water power, it is destined at no distant day to be one of the leading cities of the West.” Agriculture is a topic that always looms over the heads of the men and women, and when the conversation reaches a quiet lull, it and history are most likely to be brought up.

“My mom made homemade mittens out of old overalls. You had to put tar on them to hold onto the ears of corn.”

“I bet you got a lot of shucks to stick to you.” A few men raised their arms, as though to imitate shaking off the shucks. Only those too young to have experienced shucking corn by hand laughed.

“By God you did,” another man said, anxious to defend his position.

“Did people ever get carpal tunnel?”

“Probably, but most of ‘em died before it got to that.”

An older man and woman walk through the door. She heads toward the restrooms and begins to go in the door on her right. All eyes follow her movements, cringing, since it was the door for the men’s restroom, but thankfully she realizes which is which.

“Who’s the couple?” Though the man is sitting at the table next to us, the women are indiscreet about their inquiry. They know that by the end of this morning’s coffee, everyone will know who they are and why

they are here. The woman returns, commenting to us about the bathrooms as she passes.

“You gals are from around here. Whatever happened to Fred Sofar?” The women discuss the topic amongst themselves for a second, then finally tell the unidentified woman their most logical answer- he moved away, a common answer to questions about someone’s location. The couple comments on the size of the place, wondering how they had never been here before.

“There aren’t a lot of people from Hubbell, but they do a fine draw because there aren’t any cafés around. Tonight they must be anticipating a large crowd from the ball game because there’re two buffets set up. Both sides may be full, but they only have two waitresses because the grill can only hold so much. The buffets help with that,” says Pat. Everyone knows all the ins and outs of the restaurant. They will talk about how the restaurant has survived more than one flood, changing ownership, name changes, and a declining population. How crowds of 150 to 200 aren’t unusual on weekend nights, and when wedding parties or anniversary celebrations occur, the numbers can double.

“Times have sure changed in the last 50 years.”

People here don’t think of themselves as philosophers or ever envision their words as inspirational. They would rather remain modest. Technology has changed, but their lives are very much like those of Hubbell’s founders. 80 Acres is much like the restaurant described by the high school students of 1908: “Now comes the restaurant, then the big hotel/ When the meals are ready they ring the bell/ But what we eat we cannot tell/ But ‘Gee’ I tell you it is something swell.” Neighbors still are there to lend a hand, even in times of need, just as they were in the early 1900s: “After each disaster, the courageous people of Hubbell mopped up the water or cleared away the debris from fires or floods and started again.” A statement like this rings all too true to the residents of Hubbell.

No one ever glances at the clock on the wall or at their watches. They know to leave when the conversation begins to die down. Some mornings this may be only an hour, other mornings it can be two or three hours. A while ago, a regular passed away. The next morning at coffee, a solemn air filled the place, rather than the usual laughter. One man departed early, saying, "Take care of yourselves. We don't need any more empty seats."

ooo

BED & BREAKFAST

tom
o'connor

*In former times, all ancestral human remains were deemed sacred,
containing some essence of the personality of the deceased.
—Nigel Pennick, from Celtic Sacred Landscapes*

“Newly engaged,” we lie with a smile
to the matron (our private joke).
In our room: the empty dresser, paintings

of gold harvests are heirlooms almost
ours. The imitation log pulses. I gather
your clothes, offer them to the dresser

as ladybugs inch down the brocade
curtains. Downstairs, stew for tomorrow steams.
The matron places garlands around

her exhibit for strangers: the cedar-oiled skull
of an ancestor, the house’s guardian. It can see
our fingers grazing each other’s faces upstairs:

how we think they won’t be stripped to bone,
how we won’t lose what we now hold.
We’re not loose enough. There’s no space

to stretch and breathe deep, no breeze. Outside,

the waterfall freezes. A road creeps away.
Tomorrow, you'll be your father's girl.

So we keep retreating: the dusty digital clock blinks
wrong numbers. We're ancient siblings. It begins
to snow as the seasons sleep between us..

SEPTEMBER

chella
courington

1

Fog on the horizon hides
hard edges of the islands.
The Pacific quiet. Close to the patio
sprinklers swish: streams rising
in sun before falling in the garden.
Six plastic-pink flamingoes
parade by the sago palm.
A pair of dolphins, together
still after twenty years, watch
from the granite fountain.

2

Stripping an apple, peel swinging
in air, I think of Mother
who sliced what grew around her.
From wood the size of playing cards,
she whittled small animals:
our cat on haunches, neck turned.
Once she carved a woman
on her knees, mostly stomach,
hands hiding her bowed face.

3

Santa Ana winds blow dry
out of the Mojave
dust scattered in their wake.
Hummingbirds circle coral bells.
Their wings, shadow puppets
on stucco. Heavy with petals
dahlias bend to rocky dirt.
Once I caught a Regal Moth
panes of ruby and jade.
For three days, she flew.

4

Tonight my namesake calls
like Linda Blair from *The Exorcist*:
voice gravelly, emerging
from Minnesota. At 19 Satan
and God crowded her head.
No alcohol, no meds, no doctor
could wash them out.
At 35 she screams
God will kill you for leaving me.
I squeeze the receiver, not forgetting
her at 8 in a yellow nightshirt
brown curly hair, pressed into me.
Now I listen till I can bear no more.

AQUATIC

katherine
settle



AUTOPSY AND A EULOGY

clay
cogswell

I.

Her 'terminal event' unclear, they carve
it up and annotate the guts: the heart
weighs seven hundred grams. The mitral valve
measures two centimeters around. The brain
is fourteen hundred grams. Which shows how smart
it was. She's treated like a dinner guest:
they gently draw her out, and entertain
a dozen theories why she's deceased.

Her doctors claim that they can calculate
the moment she expired—autolysis
of certain tissues, see, tells us the rate

that long, degrading kisses browse the nude
downstairs: her jargon-swaddled corpse decays
with inexpressible exactitude.

II.

As quick as mushrooms conjured in a palm
of moisture, Mom

bit the dust.

I found her lying in her bed, still dressed—

still wearing pearls

from dining out the night before with ‘the girls.’

Impending fall’s

decked out in all the latest shades (death dolls

us up)—her favorite season. Death’s so clichéd,

and so is grief

for those of us still milling in the shade,

but the vertigo’s

authentic, lowering Mom with no belief

except in crows.

NAVAJO WOMAN

kimo
armitage

I breathe in musk of First Peoples,
the musty scent of cured hides,
corn pounded into meal,
wild horses tearing over grasslands.

You are a silver light
floating over the buffalo-filled plains
into the mountains.

Your people know a hundred
words for Earth, and
follow the flight of Ravens
darkening the sky.

But I see faces of a people
hunted, gunned down,
each head sold for \$7.

You show me a blanket
made by your great-grandmother.
“It belongs in a museum,” you say
“with the baskets and fish traps.”

But, I cannot live that way, or
in the way that others
see you: displayed in
sterile trophy houses.
I am not American;
I never was.

HOW I SPENT MY FATHER'S CANCER

kyleigh
payne

This guy named Glenn is talking to me at the coffee shop. I was just sitting at my table, drinking my coffee and eating my muffin, and now he's at my table trying to talk to me like a normal person would, which is weird because he's crazy. I've seen him before. He sits at his back table and talks to himself every morning. He always wears the same blue windbreaker, tall green socks, and pleated khaki shorts.

"Hi, I'm Glenn," he says to me.

"Hello Glenn," I say. I am in no mood to talk to Glenn. I just want to sit and drink my coffee, because my dad called last night to tell me that he was really sick and getting sicker. He didn't say it like that, but he called from the hospital and said something about the cancer spreading to his lymph nodes, and once it hits the lymph nodes you're pretty much screwed. But don't worry, he said, don't worry about a thing.

"You know, I seen you around here a lot. I'm Glenn in case you were wondering. I sit over there."

"Hmmm."

"Did you hear about the nucleus?"

"No, I didn't hear about the nucleus."

"It just exploded in my face the other day. It was crazy, man. I'm Glenn, by the way. What's your name?"

"Lindsey."

"Take care, Lindsey."

And that's it. He walks back to his corner, crosses his legs, and begins one of those pretend-conversations that he's famous for among the coffee shop regulars. When he speaks, his eyebrows move around his forehead like they're not restricted by facial muscles. And then it hits me. Glenn is the only person who has talked to me since I moved to Chicago, besides people who have a job that requires them to talk to me, and he's crazy.

2.

"Good morning Lindsey," says Rose Stadler, 78-year old lead teller and bitch. She has been working at the 27th Street Bank for 27 years. Everyone wishes she would retire, but she won't. Sometimes I leave Florida travel brochures on her desk by accident.

"Good morning, Rose."

"The papers for the Williams loan are on your desk. If you could finish that today, I would really appreciate it. Mr. Williams called yesterday afternoon--after you left early--wondering what could possibly be taking so long, and I didn't know what to tell him."

"I'll finish that up today, Rose."

"Yes, well, don't hurt yourself, dear." She thinks that adding dear to the end of her snide remarks makes her sound like less of a bitch.

Rose has such good posture that sometimes I think there must be a steel rod in her spine. Her hair is short and silver and permed into tight curls, just like every other unimaginably old lady I know. Occasionally, I daydream about dunking her head into a bucket of water and ruining all of her perfect curls. She is old and wrinkly, and she smells like death.

On Rose's desk, there are pictures of her grandchildren. In one picture

this little boy with red hair and freckles is pushing a little girl with braids on a swing and they're smiling their toothless smiles. Right next to this picture is one of those calendars that you tear a page off of every day, and a new Bible verse is waiting to inspire you on the page underneath. Today it says, "If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble. Ecclesiastes 4:10."

3.

I'm putting away groceries, which I always seem to be doing and my cell phone lights up. It says "llamada de Mom Cell" where it should say "call from Mom Cell" because I accidentally changed the language on my phone to Spanish and I can't figure out how to change it back.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hey, sweetie. What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Putting away groceries." I put Ramen noodles in my ramen noodle cupboard and canned ravioli in my Chef Boyardee cupboard.

"How's school? How's your project?"

"School's fine, project's fine. How's Dad?" Somehow I have three boxes of Applejacks, which I don't even like, but no milk. I forgot milk. This is why I am always putting away groceries.

"He's fine... tired. He doesn't want you to worry, though. He wants to know about your new project. He's tired now, though. Anything you want me to tell him when he wakes up?"

I think about this while I'm putting away frozen pizza. "Tell him that Indiana plays at 8, and he better be watching."

4.

The Williams loan is not finished yet, but it's complicated. It involves lots of copy making and signatures and stuff like that, which means I am constantly traveling between the copy room and my office which are inconveniently located on different floors. I should use the stairs because the copy room is just on the floor below my office, but waiting for the elevator takes longer. I think I spend enough time on the elevator that it could be my second office. There is no way I could ever fit my desk into the elevator, but I think about it like that anyway.

Second Floor: With a handful of random papers grabbed from my desk, hopefully one or two from the Williams file, I step into my office. I like to take up as much space as I can when I'm in my office and no one else is, so I lean back and spread out my arms and fingers. My office could use some plants and maybe a couch.

Third Floor: Brown Shoes comes into my office. I'm not sure who Brown Shoes is in real life, because inside elevators people are awkward. They always look at the floor in order to avoid making elevator conversation. It doesn't matter if you know Brown Shoes outside the elevator; you don't know Brown Shoes inside the elevator.

Second Floor: Brown Shoes and I are playing a game. We are both pretending to be completely and utterly absorbed by the papers we have brought into my office with us. Brown Shoes becomes flustered and drops his papers. I graciously look at the ceiling when he bends down to pick them up. I win.

First Floor: Brown Shoes turns out to be Rose. "Don't forget about the Williams loan," she says right after she steps out of my office. The doors close and I spread out again. I should put a coffee machine in here.

Second Floor: As I exit my office, I catch my skirt in the doors. It rips a little at the seam. Not enough to be obscene, but enough to be notice-

able. I think about crying about the skirt, but then I don't.

5.

I have developed an appreciation for the Home Shopping Network. These people could talk about earrings and blenders for hours. Tonight, they warm up with some mineral-based makeup, which I already have. At 9:27 p.m. they switch it up with stretchy clothes. At 10:43 p.m., they slip up and try to sell some tacky, amethyst jewelry, but at 12:19 a.m. they make a comeback with some miracle exercise-y thing that you don't even have to expend energy to use. I almost buy this, but I hold out and I'm glad I did. At 2:06 a.m. they're selling plates and they've got me hooked. These aren't just any plates, they are collector's items. These plates come in a set of four that display the same country cottage during the different seasons. I have to have them, and they can be mine for just three easy payments of \$29.99.

6.

My answering machine light is blinking because I lost my cell phone. It's probably my mom. It's probably about my dad.

Hey Bill, this is Jerry. I got your parts in for the '91 Buick LeSabre. Those are going to run you about \$187.63. You can just come on down and pick those up whenever you have time. Thanks.

I open my eyes because I realize that they were shut tight. I unclench my fists. I don't think I own a Buick LeSabre.

7.

On Wednesday nights, the bar down the street from the studio I share with five other graduate art students has \$3 pitchers, so that's when I

come in and work. Everyone knows that art students are alcoholics; no one else is ever there.

I like to call what I'm working on clean white slate, mostly because I haven't started yet. My canvas is completely unmarked and has this potential to be whatever I want it to be, and I don't want to ruin that. I just want it to be blank. I used to draw and paint pictures all the time and my dad would put them up around his office, but I can't put anything on this canvas.

The clock tells me that it is 10:12. I pace in front of the canvas until my head starts to hurt. I need acetaminophen in some form. I check my purse for Tylenol or Advil or something. I don't find any. I pick up a paint brush. I put down the paint brush. I feel hungry. I think about ordering pizza, and realize that if I want pizza I should order soon because my favorite pizza place only delivers for 48 more minutes. I look for a phone book. I look for my credit card. I remember that my credit card is in my apartment by the telephone because I ordered those plates. I look for cash. I have \$6.72. I remember that my cell phone is lost. I forget about pizza because I don't have a way to pay for it or a way to order it. I find Tylenol. I wash it down with the last of the water in my water bottle. I turn my attention to the canvas again. I think about priming it. I open the primer. I spill the primer on my already torn skirt. It's 10:16. I'm going to need a new skirt.

8.

The grocery store has an entire aisle full of frozen pizza in all shapes, sizes and varieties. Hamburger, pepperoni, sausage, three meat, combination, four cheese, three cheese, three cheese quesadilla, cheeseburger. The choices are overwhelming. I put one of each kind into my cart and go to the checkout line. The kid scanning my groceries looks young to be working so late. He has red hair and acne, but I like him anyway because he scans my 16 pizzas and doesn't say anything about it.

9.

My cell phone is in the freezer. And now that I think about, I remember putting it there. I was putting away groceries and talking to my mom and then I hung up and just set it down in the freezer and forgot about it. It doesn't work anymore.

10.

I'm not done with the Williams loan yet. Don't tell Rose.

11.

There's a man in dirty overalls who sometimes walks up and down the metro cars singing when I'm on my way home from work. He likes to sing old Patsy Cline songs, especially the one about walking and midnight and moonlight, you know the one. It always sounds so funny coming from this big, old man, but people avoid making eye contact with him, and, when he starts coming in my direction, I look away too.

Next to me, there's this couple practically having sex through their clothes. I would guess they're in college. The boy has black-rimmed glasses and straight, dark hair. He is attractive. The girl is probably attractive too, but I can only see the back of her head. The boy rests his hand on the girl's breast in an accidentally-on-purpose kind of way. The girl doesn't seem to mind. In fact, I think she's enjoying it.

I start a grocery list on a scrap of paper I find in my purse.

Eggs.

Milk (for real this time).

"When we get home, I'm going to rip your clothes off in the doorway." The boy thinks he is whispering. Not knowing how loud you're talking

must be a side-effect of arousal.

Bread.
Soup.
Bananas.

“Will you do that thing I like? With your tongue?” the girl asks. I’m guessing he will. His grunt sounded affirmative.

Toilet Paper
Lean Cuisines
Frozen Pizza

“And can we have sex on the kitchen counter, and then on the floor, and then in the shower?” Why wait for the bedroom when you’re getting foreplay finished on the metro, I always say.

I get off at the Washington stop. Sadly I never find out how many times they will be having sex or where.

12.

The light is the first thing I notice when I walk into my apartment. Not the sink full of dishes. Not the bananas rotting on the table. Not the TV, which has apparently been left on all day. I notice the light, which happens to be blinking again. I want to ignore it, but I can’t. I heard somewhere that blinking lights cause seizures. I press the button.

Lindsey. It’s me, Mom. I need to talk to you. Call me back when you get this.

She doesn’t sound normal. Her voice is tight and small.

Lindsey. Mom again. Please answer your phone. Your father is sick...sicker. I don’t know how much longer he has. He was okay, but now he’s not and I don’t know. I don’t know.

13.

After the funeral, I see Glenn at the coffee shop again. He is sitting in the back like he always does. He is talking to himself like he always does. He is wearing the same blue windbreaker, tall green socks, and pleated khaki shorts as he always does. He comes up to my table again.

“Hey, I’m Glenn. Are you new here?”

“Yes, first-timer,” I say. It’s easier not to explain.

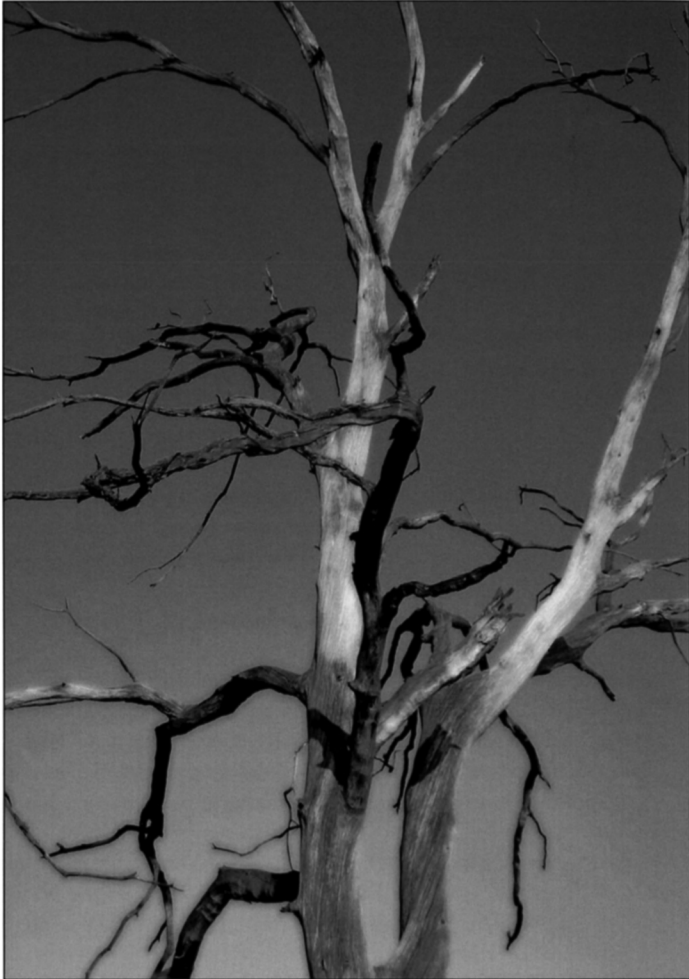
“Well, I’m Glenn. Who are you?”

“Exactly.”

ooo

MALEVOLENT

jonathan
hall



US IN A MIRROR

richard
boada

It's done. Filiped match spit light, our faces
fire in expressionless orange. Her hard violent
lips pull ember to the filter. Snapping thin
paper reels. Crisp tobacco burns, departs
into her body, rifles through her nostrils
against my jaw shaved smooth. I flick the match
into the toilet, it hisses in water. Ash falls
on tile. Our torsos swallowed by the room's
dismissive gray. Rosined muscles, taut,
she prepares to breathe for one.

**SAN FRANCISCO #5: EVEN HOUSING PROJECTS
ARE PRETTY**

shantha
laura
susman

Mainly in the sunlight splashed
on punched glass from a gaping passenger's car window.
The glove box yawns tossed-through maps and a pressed
tube of sunscreen. The seat is piled with grit and glass chips,
the radio slot a maw with limp-tongue wires.

Light catches the crashed glass pooled on the sidewalk
tinted a blue you never see when it's whole in the car door –
as if the window remembered the look of the fresh sky
and shattered holding that image still,
bits of air that pop beneath my flip flops.

I avoid the corner where a garbage can should be to collect
rib rinds and flinched pork fried rice
that dot the sidewalk like pocked acne scars
on the chin of Benito el Borracho who eats
his greasy meat leaning drunk on chain links,
after the bar closes and cars rest uneasy in the street.

In egg yolk daylight Benito's mess is easily overlooked,
as slanted sunbeams hit the window boxes of the buildings.
They are painted government-issued, poverty-masking hues:
Terra Cotta, Rust, Avocado, California Poppy.
Someone is planting basil in her box; I am growing tomatoes.

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES BAXTER

david
murphy
&
katherine
settle

Katherine Settle (KS): I had taken my son on a camping trip, and all of a sudden everything went to crap. My cell phone didn't work anymore, and so we really didn't know how to communicate. We were rediscovering difficulties about communication. Still, I love people being ingenious and finding ways to communicate.

David Murphy (DM): Yeah, communication. There was a guy in my home town who collected those crystal radios, and he had the biggest collection I had seen then and have seen since. He had an entire room specifically in his house for the radios, and I think he had eight shelves, and each shelf was about a foot and a half to two feet high, and all the way lining his room, the way some people have books lining their walls. It was crazy.

Charlie Baxter (CB): I wanted to create something like that when I was a kid: a radio, all of which I had built myself, so I tried, but I didn't want to use a crystal. I wanted to use a razor blade and a safety pin. The tuner I could make, and I could get a razor blade and a safety pin, but I couldn't make my own earplugs. Nobody can make their own earplugs. Or, at least I couldn't. That I had to buy. And you can't make wire. It's like rope. You gotta get the wire. Even Thoreau had to borrow a shovel.

KS: Just makes you think how specialized those basic things are. My dad was a chemical engineer, so I think sometimes I channel some of those interests in those things.

CB: Yeah. My son is a civil engineer—actually a structural engineer. I don't know where he gets it from, because, actually, in spite of this talk about crystal radios, I can't fix anything.

KS: Maybe it's not the same. Maybe it's not the same skill. You know, I wouldn't think so. Because, the guy at the repair shop has completely a different skill set than a structural engineer.

CB: I thought I was going to grow up to be handy, but my stepfather never taught me any of that. He couldn't be bothered. And you have to learn it early if you're going to be able to do it.

KS: Yeah, Dad dumped some clocks in our laps that were broken, so we could take them apart, and we did, and it was a lot of fun, but we didn't fix them. But just seeing how things worked together was pretty fascinating—it was a secret life, and it made me fascinated with automata. In the 17th century they were making these life sized automata that would write and draw and paint, and that was just amazing.

CB: It was the great age of automatons. Clock works.

KS: I looked on YouTube where they had one—

DM: I don't know what an automaton is.

CB: An automaton is like a robot. You know, a pre-robot. Which, you know, means a wind-up man, or a wind-up doll, or a wind-up anything.

KS: And they could even be life-size. And what was fascinating about—I mean, if you Google it, I mean, if you check it out on YouTube, there's one of a little boy, and he draws a picture and he has human eyelashes, so he can close his eyes, and if you crumple up a piece of paper and put it on where he's drawing, he blows it away. This little puff of air comes out of his mouth and *poof!* He blows it away. You'll have to check it out sometime.

DM: All right.

KS: It's very cool. I love clockwork.

CB: So, should we talk about literature or writing for awhile?

KS: If you want to....

CB: Then we can go back to robotics or whatever (*everyone laughs*).

KS: I loved the...I read the interview you gave to Powells.com

CB: Uh-huh.

KS: And you had said something about a mosaic style of writing—I wasn't sure if I should save that for our class period or say it right now? I'm kind of in the same boat, which makes me very interested in that; I thought I was a language kind of writer, and I'm finding I'm more of a character driven person, and they're kind of developing and going outward and in to each other. Is that sort of the same thing you're talking about?

CB: It certainly could be. Start a story by saying to yourself, "I'm going to get this person on the page." You don't want to do put this character in a long scene. You do it as a snapshot. And that's an interesting way to write a story; something about that method suits readers, because our attention span tends to expand when we read such pieces. I always found that sort of writing congenial. The thing is, you can't write that way forever. You have to introduce something into the story, usually, to make it go somewhere. Some kind of risk, a danger. Because finally, readers are going to say, "This person is very interesting, but what's the story?" And they won't mind it if you give it to them in little pieces, as long as the pieces add up to something, a spiral of events or a life.

KS: Right, because it's such a visual culture now, that we need those immediate code-feedbacks to engage with characters.

CB: Exactly. We're going to virtual and auditory mediums. Obviously this is the effect of screens, of screen culture, of TV and movies. Screens are everywhere in our lives.

KS: One of your works, *A Feast of Love*, is in post-production as a movie, now, right?

CB: No, it's out. It's out. And it's already disappearing from theaters. *(Everyone laughs.)* Yeah, have you seen this? This is the movie that I— *(Charlie picks up his novel, A Feast of Love, which has a mosaic of images from the movie on the book's cover, and Charlie shows it to us.)*

KS: It looks beautiful. There's Morgan Freeman.

DM: How do you feel about the adaptation?

CB: It's okay.

KS: This is a big topic in our class. Why do the short stories seem to disappear without a trace, yet there's so much more commercial interest for novels and film?

CB: Well, people would rather read novels than short stories. They'd rather have a relationship than a one night stand. But, my stories have had a pretty good run. They're still mostly in print. They've been anthologized. You know, I have nothing to complain about.

KS: Kind of one of those sad things, the way of the world. Once you release the work, people do what they want.

DM: It's not the author's work any more.

KS: Sometimes those interpretations can be really weird.

CB: Well, when the story is published, you're powerless as to how people read it: what they say about it, how they're going to criticize it.

KS: So, does workshop for us function like that a little bit? You know, like it's a testing field to see what kind of reactions you're going to get, to see if you're totally wide of the mark?

CB: Not in my workshops.

KS: How do your workshops work?

CB: In my workshops you can't, for the first fifteen minutes, say whether you liked it, whether you didn't like it, where you "had problems." What you have to do is talk about what the story seems to be doing, what the story is about, the form the story takes, and whether the subject is adhering to such-and-such a form. Whether the form and the content are working together, or whether they're working at cross purposes. And that takes some time to get out. It is not in my class.... I mean, we're talking about technical issues of the story. You have to open the toolbox and talk about the technical issues of the story. I don't care whether you like the story or not. I don't care whether I like the story or not. I'm asking about what kind of story it is, and what kinds of problems it has. To get it described formally and thematically, that's what a workshop is trying to do.

KS: I like that.

CB: You can talk about where you had problems in the story after you've been discussing it for twenty minutes or half an hour, but you have to have gotten—you have to be attuned to the writer and have some sense of what he or she seems to be doing with the story--the techniques that have been produced--and if you can't do that, you're not a writer.

KS: From my perspective, in terms of having my work workshopped, that would be wonderful. That would be a great way to start, I think. Because it would also require the people who are reading your work stay really engaged with it.

CB: You're right. They have to have read it closely. To have reread it closely. To have thought about it and to have internalized it. "What's happening here? What about this dialogue? What about this scene? What about this characterization? What about this plot?"

KS: It seems to me that that calls out the best in your reader and—

CB: That's right.

KS: And it's a challenge—

CB: That's right. Absolutely.

KS: The best writers that I've talked to—like you—have a generosity of spirit and a dedication to honesty. They have both of those, because it's hard to be honest without hurting people.

CB: It's not going to hurt someone as much—it saves them a lot of time by saying, “I think this story wants to be X, but over here I don't think it's doing that. But if it wants to be X, the main thing that you—the writer—should thinking about is setting this piece over here in order to make that other piece work.”

DM: I have a different—a more divergent sort of question.

CB: Yes.

DM: I read *The Art of Subtext*, and I could filter out what seemed to be a mild obsession with the writer Bernardo Atxaga's—is that how you pronounce his name?

CB: Aht-shah-gah.

DM: Atxaga's work, *Obabakoak*. I was wondering if you could discuss how obsessions influence your work?

CB: Ahhh.... Let's talk about obsessions. (*Everyone laughs.*) And why obsessions are really good for fiction. They're not good for life. It's not good to have an obsession in life. It can wreck your life. But an obsession in a fictional character usually means that that person really wants something and is thinking about it all the time and is going to do something, usually, in order to get it. Readers like this, because it means that something is going to happen. You know, the character is going to be a

villain or he or she is going to be a hero, but it means that something is definitely going to happen in a consequential way.

So, it's not that I want to be obsessive, although at times in my life I have been, it's that I recognize that for characters an obsession is really good in making causes turn into effects.

DM: So it seems to me that obsession as a character trait is a function of what makes plot move.

CB: I would say that plot is a function of character. You start with a character, a character who desperately wants something. You know, money. Or a woman. Or a man. You know, it can be greed or love or lust or needs to get somewhere, let's say to Singapore, for whatever reason. "I've got to be in Singapore. I've got to be in Singapore." So I can see the story going somewhere. If you think about obsession with a man or a woman. I once started a story called "Stained Glass" with the line "She thought he was a decent enough man until she tried to break up with him." Given a line like that, anyone could write the story.

DM: I read in your interview with Dave Weich that you said you thought a large part of your work was about people who are watching other people who are happy.

KS: Wow.

DM: I wonder if you could comb over that again or tell us if that perspective has changed?

CB: No. *(Everyone laughs.)*

KS: "No, I won't comb over it again."

CB: I've been thinking about that problem a lot. I used to teach undergraduates. They would say, "These stories are depressing. These stories are morbid. Why can't we ever read any happy stories?" So I

would say, “Okay. Great—where are they? Name one novel—one serious novel—with a happy ending.” They couldn’t do it; they would just look at me. So, I would say to them, “Fiction is a dramatic medium, and as opposed to, say, the lyrical poetry, a dramatic medium usually requires trouble: trouble, unhappiness, danger, all of the grungy things in life.” Now, comedy can usually help resolve those matters. But most serious fiction can’t extend its narratives with lengthy scenes of happiness over hundreds of pages, with the result that—I see a couple over there, and they’re obviously lovers and they’re crazy in love with each other. They’re probably not the story. My looking-at-them is more likely to be the story, in the way that Adam and Eve are not a story so much as Satan’s gazing at them is the story. Happiness is not something you experience, happiness is something you remember, according to Oscar Levant. When you’re in the middle of happiness you’re not aware of it; if you were, you wouldn’t be happy. And that’s why you can’t write an entire novel about happiness. Nobody has ever done that. They’ve come close. But they’ve never quite done it. Ah, and so: Yes, I still believe that the truth is that, if we’re writers, we are usually setting up dramatic situations in which somebody has been set outside the circle of happiness and is looking at it and thinking, “What do I have to do to get over there?”

KS: Makes me think of John Cheever.

CB: Ha! I’ve just written an essay about this subject, and this whole problem is called “Regarding Happiness,” and the last half of the essay is about one of Cheever’s stories. You bet. Cheever is all over this problem. And there’s a story of his called, “The Worm in the Apple.” It’s completely about this. But, you know, all of Cheever’s fiction deals with the emotion of exclusion.

KS: Do you work with that as well?

CB: Yes, look in my book, *Saul and Patsy*. Exclusion is central to that story, to that novel. And in a way to this one (*Charlie indicates* The Feast of Love).

KS: Do you know whether or not the reading is going to have copies of the books you wrote? I really wanted to go by Hastings and pick up a copy of some of them.

CB: I don't know what they've ordered and what they haven't ordered. So, does that answer your question?

DM: Very nicely. I think that was an excellent response. This is kind of a two part question. And, I'd like to ask them both before you respond. Does the extent to which society makes fiction writers and poets justify their craft disturb you? And, what is your response to poet/critic/chairman of the NEA like Dana Gioia who says that,

“The voluntary audience of serious contemporary poetry consists mainly of poets, would-be poets, and a few critics. Additionally, there is a slightly larger involuntary and ephemeral audience consisting of students who read contemporary poetry as assigned course work. In sociological terms, it is surely significant that most members of the poetry subculture are literally paid to read poetry: most established poets and critics now work for large educational institutions. Over the last half-century, literary bohemia has been replaced by an academic bureaucracy.”

CB: Well. Nobody questioned my right to be what I am once my fiction started to make money. America is a pragmatic culture. Americans tend to judge ideas and activities on whether they “work” or make money. That’s the intellectual industry of our country. There are places in this country, New York, San Francisco, and a few others, where nobody will ask you why you’re engaged in the making of art. So if you say, “I’m making art,” nobody will bother you. Of course, you still have to put food on the table. When people ask you to justify yourself—“You’re a writer, why do you do that?”—you can duck the question. In America, any writer who isn’t making millions will seem peculiar to the mass of people. In Europe, they’ll say, “You’re a writer? Fine. Where can I read something of yours?” It’s not quite so true here because we’re so pragmatic. Once my work started to be published, people stopped asking me questions like that.

As to the second question—that’s a huge problem that I don’t know that I’m equipped to answer. One of the nominees for the National Book Award this year is Robert Hass. Hass has a huge readership. People love his work: non-poets, people who like to read poetry. Allen Ginsberg had a large readership—people still read Allen Ginsberg. People read Louise Glück and care about her work. Books for poetry sell better now than they ever have. There are more books in poetry, and some of them don’t sell very well. But I don’t like it when people start to trash an entire artistic activity because it’s not selling “properly.” Are there adequate justifications?

I think it’s just not true that only poets read somebody like Bob Hass or Eddie Hirsch or Louise Glück. Lots and lots and lots of people read these poets. Gioia has been taken up by the Republicans in a big way because he says things that these business people like to hear—that poetry is unimportant, and that we don’t need to pay attention to it—but I don’t like the position he’s getting himself into when he makes statements like that. He should know better.

DM: There’s really no way to stamp art out, even if you wanted to. Myself, I’ve been writing for years, and I’ve never made a cent off it.

CB: Yeah.

DM: At this point, I should know that I’m either a terrible writer or that people don’t want to pay me for it, or something like that. There’s no profit for me to write. But I write anyway. It’s essential to me.

CB: This period of a writer’s development—the one you’re in right now—is the hardest one in a writer’s life. It’s the one where you just don’t know. You can’t know. You can’t know what the future is. I didn’t know; nobody knows at your age. It’s a crapshoot.

DM: A person can write for years and not get published.

CB: That’s right. But that doesn’t mean a person’s failed. That means

that there's this thing you wanted to do, and you did it. You may have had to do other things along the way, but there was this thing that you wanted to do. There were points in my life when people would say—my sister-in-law once said, "Why do you write about people with such depressing lives?" Another person said to me, "I hate your fiction. Why do I hate your fiction?" Somebody else said, "How long are you going to go on doing this?" Don't worry too much about these moments. They happen.

KS: How do you feel about the way that your book has been changed for the movie version?

CB: I have nothing to complain about. I sold the book. I know what happens when books are adapted to movies. You know, I'm not a child, and I'm not complaining.

DM: What you said there, though—there are advantages to not being published. An unpublished work, for instance, will never be finished or considered as permanent as something that has been published, so unpublished work is always a living, breathing thing that can be revised whenever the author wants. When a work goes out, and it's published, it becomes concrete.

KS: That's a great point, because I saw at the Beach Museum of Art—there's a beautiful collection and a visiting artist came who had a work in the collection, and it was in storage. She wanted to rework it, so she just sat down and looked at it, and she reworked it, and nobody dared say anything. (*Everybody laughs.*)

CB: I can't remember who it was, it was Monet or somebody, who was banned from the gallery because he would come in and start working on his paintings that were up on the wall.

KS: Do you ever do that? Have an 'A' text and a 'B' text that have been published in different forms?

DM: It's seems so hard to rework a novel
after it's published.

CB: Once it's published, it's out there.

ooo

INTERIOR #7

katherine
settle



SOUL BRUISE AT 27.39726027 YEARS

marc
welsh

A child cries. My eyes stay dry.
Some days I try, and some I stay in bed and sigh.

The dog whines. She wants touched.
Food and love ain't asking much.

A full moon don't mean a thing no more.
I'll break a window to get by a locked door.

Can't feel a thing. I need a friend.
I'd die to change the boat I'm in.
The cosmos laughs at me again.
I snooze and lose and never win.

I tie my shoes day after day.
I drink my booze and waste away.

The days they come and never cease
And in my mind I find no peace.

The love I sought no greater than
The clothes I bought. The hourglass sand
That can't be stopped or caught up in
A human hand or story plot,

It trickles yet into a pile
That seethes regret
My hair turns gray
While I forget.

At least for now I have my health.
All I do is what I choose,
And if I met my younger self
I hope I'd fight myself and lose.

ALMOST LIKE MUSIC

meredith
duling

My voice was stolen,
singing stilled,
hands limp at my sides,
all music gone,
even my clumsy whistling
whisked away
because she couldn't hear,
couldn't hear my sigh of frustration
couldn't hear me laugh,
I just smiled,
let my eyes speak.

Then suddenly
hope found my hands,
hope of friendship.
They began experimenting
in the air before me,
floundering, but making a
little crazy sense,
and a door opened.

She led me gently
into her silent world
patient with my failings
coaxing my fingers to form
a new language
that was...
almost like music.

CURVES AND HOLLOWES

aileen
sanku

Who I was when I met you:

I was twenty-two. I was thirty pounds heavier than I am now, all tan, plump flesh. Rounded belly, thighs, hips, breasts. My face was a broad fat moon. I've never had an ass, but then I had the beginnings of one. Your friends called me thick, meaning it as a compliment, but the dense heaviness of that word turned me off. I was not voluptuous, nor zaftig; I will not practice that kind self-deception. I was chubby, have always been too short to carry extra weight. You point that out now as we go through old photos. "Look at what a tub you are here," you say, tracing your finger across my belly on the computer screen. "Such a little tub."

I wore my hair naturally, long brown riotous curls pulled back into a messy bun. I wore the same outfit most everyday that summer: little boy's wife-beaters, my belly curving out from beneath them, a frayed jean skirt from Target, and a green studded suede belt that I bought from the T.J. Maxx across from your house. I carried a huge gold tote; you said it was ridiculous, called it my C-3PO. "I don't care what you say," I would mock-pout, "I love it."

The truth was that I loved *you*, wanted to be with you so badly that you could say anything, and I just didn't care. When you were at work, your cat and I would lie in your bed together and I would eat Cheez-Its and sour cream and onion chips from your pantry, leaving tell-tale crumbs all over your sheets. I would tell the cat, "You love him? So do I." You were twenty-seven and you seemed so together, in control. I didn't know how to live, didn't know how to pay bills and argue with the insurance company and ask my boss for a raise and buy my own groceries. I mean, I knew how to do those things, but they just seemed too adult to actually do.

We would walk to the store in the early afternoons and buy food that I couldn't afford. I was only working part time, keeping my clothes in a hamper at my friend's house and staying with you every night. I didn't

care about saving money. I would cash in a pay check and spend the whole thing on one day of luxuriating with you. “You practically live here,” you would smirk, “so today you can buy the groceries.” When we checked out, you always ended up paying for half: “Oh, save your money.” I lived above my means, indulged my champagne taste. Brie and water crackers. Smoked gouda, bleu cheese crumbles, buffalo mozzarella still in its brine. Salami, the good kind wrapped in wax paper. King’s crab legs, scallops, prawns, tri-tips. Heirloom tomatoes, English cucumbers, waxy orange bell peppers.

You’d barbecue, and I’d sit right by you with my other indulgences: cigarettes, wine, magazines at newsstand price. *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. In those moments, it was the life I dreamed I’d have when I grew up. Eating sophisticated food and reading on a summer Sunday. “Stop reading already,” you’d say. “Watch the movie.” You’d move my chair, me still in it, so I could see through the open sliding glass door. You were shocked that I had never watched *Star Wars*, or *The Lord of the Rings*, or *Indiana Jones*. You wanted to show them to me, teach me hidden meanings, point out favorite quotes. I didn’t like long epic movies, but since you did, I tried to find them fascinating too. I fell in love with Yoda, talked like him all that summer to make you laugh.

You’d feed me tidbits off the barbecue, lecturing me on the proper way to cook. Boil ribs first; if you put them straight on the grill they’ll dry out before they’re halfway cooked. Let the meat sit after you take it off the heat so that the juices can distribute. You’d pile our burgers high with sautéed mushrooms and balsamic vinaigrette and bleu cheese crumbles; put them on French rolls the way I liked. I’d always get food on my shirt, and you’d snort in amusement, “You’re such a slob, always making a mess,” as you’d spit on a napkin and scrub it off.

And so I didn’t work that summer, didn’t leave for graduate school in Colorado, didn’t do much of anything but eat and drink and smile and laugh and hope that you would love me too.

Who I became:

I turned twenty-three and then twenty-four. We moved in together, or rather things stayed the same and I started to pay rent. I ran off the weight. I began to refuse your offers of food, distrust the burgers and cheeses and crackers. We argued over how much olive oil you put in the salads: "I saw you put in more than a tablespoon," I'd say, getting up to microwave a veggie burger and stake out my own salad, dressed only in lemon juice.

Where I was once plump, rounded skin, I became all angles. Honed clavicles and protruding shoulder blades. I would bend over and see my spine. Where my belly was ample, protuberant over belt buckles and jean waists, I now had only a taut layer of skin, stretched tight like a drum between my hip bones. My face was no longer a moon, but cheekbones and eye hollows.

I did not wear the same clothes over and over. I finally had the money and the figure to buy the clothes I wanted, marveling over my newly thin body in dressing room mirrors. Jeans that cost almost two hundred dollars, camisoles, leggings, body-hugging sweaters, stretchy belts to go under my breasts, what was left of them. I retired the gold bag, carrying a straw tote with white piping, gold linked chains for handles. I still had no ass, but my thighs became compact muscle and the veins showed on the top of my hands. I began to not think of you as so funny or so wise. I took offense at the things you would say, strained against your patient teachings, seeing them as condescension. Where I was impractical, silly, a child in all my baby fat, I became sharp, shrewish.

I lifted weights and did sit-ups when I watched your movies. I didn't let myself sit in front of a screen unless I was moving in some way. I dyed my hair blonder and blonder, the dark roots straining against the golden highlights. I looked at myself in the mirror all the time. I liked to put on my old clothes and watch them fall off my waist.

You'd say, "Of course you look good. You're totally hot now." But you said it with distance, dully. You didn't wipe off my shirt anymore, or make fun of the outrageous purses I bought or my horrible taste in music. You looked at me unsmilingly, shrugged: "You're skinny enough. Don't lose anymore weight."

Now:

I am twenty-five, and you are thirty. We could not hold. Like water freezing and melting, like a body expanding and shrinking, things became worn out, damaged. I am still thin, but my body has lost some of its sharpness when I started eating tri-tips and cheese again and stopped weight training. I still run, will always run because I love it. The other things were chores, and there are enough chores to do. Now you look at me resignedly: "You know, I *always* thought you were beautiful."

ooo

ETHEREAL

jonathan
hall



HONEYMOON

amy
forgue

At six in the morning I decide to go out by myself. I am awake with nerves but Jeremy's breathing is still heavy and even behind me. On the beach I go barefoot in the water and let the sand slide between my toes. My body feels tight and I put my hands in the front pockets of my sweater and walk with my head down, so that before I see it I nearly trip over an abrupt outcropping of sharp basalt rising from the sand. Farther up the beach the rocks swell first into large boulders and then into high cliffs, slit full of washed-out caverns carved by millions of relentless high tides. As I walk along the aisle of volcanic glass and approach the boulders my feet dabble in a stream of water trickling from the caves. Getting closer I notice the source and discover that I can see down inside the pool of stagnant leftover tide. Down in the shadows of the water a dead seal pup, bloated and blurry, floats against the jaggedly eroded rock.

On the way back up to the hotel the ocean behind seems to overcome me with each crashing wave. I want my legs to walk my body straight into the ground and bury me there. I want sand in my eyes and nose and mouth and lungs.

I get back just in time hear the alarm go off on my watch. I run across the room and try to get to it in time but I am too late and Jeremy rolls over and puts his hand on my pillow. He opens his eyes and focuses on where I am standing at the foot of the bed. He waves his hand toward me and smiles. I sit down and he kisses my back and pulls me under the blankets. The queen-size bed is really just two singles pushed together, and as we make love I can feel the ridge between them all the way down my back.

Jeremy doesn't know why we called off the wedding. Not really, at least, not the real reason. It was just something that I suggested and he agreed. Just like that. Not even a fight. I was relieved, of course, but a little surprised too.

“Jeremy, I don’t know if I can go through with all this right now,” I had said one night last week, walking the dogs through our neighborhood.

“It’s whatever you think,” he said. Just like that.

Now its been six days since we called it off—twice as many as we should have been husband and wife by now. That’s a weird thing to say I guess. Sometimes I look at Jeremy and think that if there is some kind of man that can stick to one spot for a while, he would be that kind. He’s silly and indulgent, but loyal just the same. But sometimes I look at him and wonder what makes me think I’ll know what to do with him eighteen or twenty-nine or forty-seven years from now. I should be three days a wife but I find myself thinking that I don’t even know what that means.

But the plane tickets were non-refundable. A done deal. Anyway, it’s a trip we couldn’t pass up. We were already packed. The opportunity of a lifetime. Six days and seven nights in a four-star, one of a kind, ocean front suite on Oahu, complete with pay-per-view and a Jacuzzi and a view of the Pacific from the bed. We have our own maid who folds the hand towels and washcloths into hearts and we have fresh cut flowers in the room every day. We have a twenty-four hour masseur.

We order room service every night. Jeremy lies on his back and sucks the meat off of chicken wings while I nibble on egg salad sandwiches. I’m not hungry and I haven’t been for weeks. On the nine-hour flight I downed muscle relaxers with red wine while Jeremy scratched in crossword puzzles and watched a movie starring Kevin Bacon. When I was a little girl I thought Kevin Bacon was what sexy meant and I don’t know why. Probably because of my mother.

The resort is for couples, so the hot tub in our room is heart-shaped, everyone keeps calling us “Mr. and Mrs. Spool” and there are a lot of dirty movies to order. This is especially exciting for Jeremy, who likes to have a video on while we fuck. Sometimes he makes me promise him, although I’m not quite sure why he thinks this is necessary. I’d do it

anyway and he knows it.

That's the thing—it's not that I'm not in love with Jeremy—I am. There's a lot I would do, if you know what I mean. To make this work, there's a lot I would do. But I'm just not sure that getting married right now is one of those things. I don't really know what to say about it, or how my mind changed. All I know is that it was what I wanted. Or at least thought that I wanted. Or, I should say needed. Anyway, it was one of those things I thought I had to make happen. You know, I thought I would have to *make* it happen. And then, when it turned out that I didn't, I guess that's when everything changed and I didn't want it anymore. Any of it.

Jeremy drinks his coffee with so much cream and sugar that it looks like liquid caramel and makes his breath taste more sweet than bitter. He's standing on the little balcony that pokes out from the bedroom part of our suite. The air is damp and the wind is blowing and I'm staring at the little ripples of muscle on his back and thinking about the ocean. When we met two years ago I told him I wanted to live by the ocean, "When I grow up," I had said. This was supposed to be my consolation prize, I guess. Seven nights with the ocean on all sides to make up for years of landlocked suburbia. That's if I stay with him. This is what I get for staying the rest of the time. Jeremy kisses my neck, images of the leftover tide flashing in my mind.

"I want you to be happy here," he says.

"It's beautiful," I say.

"That's all that matters, you know?" says Jeremy.

"I know."

"Having a good time so far?"

"Yes."

“Ready to go back home?” he says with typical sarcasm and I laugh.

“Of course not.”

“Because we can go. We can go home tonight—kick back, watch some TV and pay the bills. I’m really excited about dealing with your mother and my mother and what everyone else has to say about all this. I’d much rather do all that than make love to you by the beach,” says Jeremy. I punch him hard in the chest and he wraps his arms around my waist. “We can bust out of this whenever we want.”

“I’m really excited about keeping all the presents,” I say and he laughs.

“You know I just want to make you happy,” he says.

“I know.”

“Whatever that takes.”

“Let’s go. I need some sun right now,” I say and wiggle free from how he’s been holding me so tight.

“We should stay in and order a movie later, you know?” he says.

“Yeah.”

“Do you promise?”

By the pool with the sun beating down, Jeremy rubs lotion on my shoulders. I don’t need it—I never burn since I was a kid—but I think Jeremy likes it, this closeness. He likes to have his hands on me in public this way, rubbing my arms and legs and chest and back and shoulders. The water is glossy and reflects the late morning sun into my eyes from high in the sky, but I like the heat of it. Like being in an incubator, completely safe and warm and alone. I stretch out on my stomach and undo all the little ties on my suit. Jeremy cannonballs into the clear

stillness of the pool.

“Babe,” Jeremy’s voice calls from somewhere outside, “Hey, Babe.” The sound is crossed by wind and I feel like I’ve been lying here a long time. “Baby, wake up,” he says. I sense his weight beside me on the flimsy lounge before I open my eyes. I can feel the chilly water streaming off of his body and forming puddles on mine. He begins tying all the strings on me back together in tight, little knots.

“These guys are talking about a hike, going hiking,” says Jeremy. I open one eye and look to the water where another couple’s heads are popped up over the marble edge with big, expectant smiles. The sun is straight above me now and I think about walking over to the bar.

“It’s fine, you can go,” I mumble and close my eyes again.

“No, it’s for couples. You know, all couples from the resort. There’s a guide and everything,” he says.

“Oh, no,” I whine.

“Come on, it’ll be good,” he says. “It’s not too hot today.” I sit up and swing my legs around, then lean my body against him and press my face against his cool, wet neck. “Come on, baby, wake up,” he says.

“Let’s just have a drink,” I say with closed eyes.

“No, we’ve been drunk every day here,” he says. “Let’s get out, do something.” I finally look at him and he’s got this desperate look on his face with his eyebrows pushed together and I’m suddenly more aware of him and the sun and the giant smiling faces at the edge of the pool. Jeremy looks sad almost, hurt like I haven’t seen him look at me before. I wonder why now, now after I have already decided not to marry him. It’s almost the face I’ve been dreading this whole time, full of rejection and confusion. And if it’s always been there I haven’t noticed until now. So I decide to agree to go.

The woman's name is Jenny and the man's name is Clark and they are from Naperville, Illinois. There is also Christi and Will and Colin and Linsay and the guide's name is Dick. We're all walking in a straight line, with Dick walking backward and pointing things out. We left from the beach, filing through a gap in the dense forest lining the resort's ocean front. Dick leads with a "this-way" kind of attitude, seeming to herd us like sheep along the right trails, like he's afraid one of us might stop to look at something he can't explain. He points from tree to tree—this flower, that bird—like he's talking from a script. But Jeremy's walking along with his face in the air, holding my hand and dragging me behind.

"Isn't this great, Babe?" Jeremy says when we stop at the top of a long rise with a steep drop down to the ocean. "Just kind of makes you want to forget about everything back in the real world. Like you just want to fall off, you know?"

"Yes, I do know," I say. He leans his body against me with a sudden push. My balance goes and my stomach jerks and I think I'm going to fall. But he's also got his arms around my waist and now he's laughing and kissing me in little pecks.

"You should see your face! Like you were going to fall!" he teases, holding on tight while I try to push him away. "You know I've got you," he says.

Dick tells everyone to keep walking; we've got further to go. But my balance seems off for good, a sick nervousness in my stomach. A familiar feeling I get when I don't know how to make Jeremy be serious. How I felt when I stopped taking the pill, when I thought he was never going to ask me. A sickness like I'm wasting my time, following him around the way I do. Like I have to do something to make him settle, commit—but that's not how I want to live.

The hike is easy, along the coast, uphill for a while then down. All the couples hold hands and the sun is high up and filters through the leaves

of the trees. Jeremy's taken his shirt off and wrapped it around his head, and his skin is tan and slick with sweat. He's trying to get me to skip and run, making a joke of it because he can tell I'm falling behind. But I'm not in any hurry and I don't have the energy. I try to look like I'm totally absorbed in the air and everything humming all around me. We get to a point where the land sticks out sharply over the ocean. The trail is lower here, and we've been walking downhill for the last mile or so.

"Let's all take a rest and then we can head back," says Dick the guide, "unless of course one of you guys wants to jump for it."

"How high up?" says Jeremy, walking to the edge to look down.

"Forty-five or so," says Dick.

"Too far," says Clark from Naperville.

"Nah," says Jeremy.

"People do this?" says one of the other husbands.

"You don't have to," says Dick, "but yeah, people do."

"How the hell d'you get back up?" I ask, and Jeremy looks at me with surprise.

"Climb," says Dick, "it's easy."

"Wanna do it?" Jeremy says to me.

"I won't be able to climb back up."

"It's easy!" says Dick. "Just keep three points of contact. Go slow. Move your hands first, then your feet. If you fall, just try again."

“It’s too dangerous,” says Lindsay the wife.

“No it’s not, there’s good places to put your hands and feet. And on a day like today you shouldn’t have any problem swimming back up to the rock,” says Dick.

I don’t say anything, mostly because I’m not sure why I feel so much like falling.

Jeremy goes before I do. He wants us to go together, but I say no it’s too much pressure. I have to do it when I’m ready; I can’t have him pushing me off of a cliff. He runs and jumps. I can’t watch. I count eight slow seconds before he hits the water. Then I can hear him yell, yeah that was awesome. So I walk to the edge and look. But I can’t see him, he’s not in the water.

“Down here, Babe!” he calls and I can see part of his arm clinging to the rock face a few feet above the water. “Your turn.”

I stand at the edge without my shoes on. I’m scared of falling now and scared of getting back up. I’ve never done anything like this before and I’m intimidated. I’m intimidated by the ocean and the cliff and all the open air in between. The lack of control, the release to gravity, the natural way of things. To just be pulled down by the earth.

“She’s not going to do it,” says a voice behind me.

“Come on, Babe!” calls Jeremy from below.

So just when I think I can’t—when I think I’m going to have to put my head down, turn around and walk away—I run. I run fast enough that I won’t be able to stop myself when I get to the edge. So I fly off and my stomach drops and as I’m sailing through the air I think that I want to die. I want these to be my last moments, I want this to be it. I want to go deeper and deeper and deeper to the bottom and never come back up.

But as I plunge in I am fully aware of my consciousness. I am fully aware of my senses—everything. Water and bubbles, everywhere, stabbing my body. The water is up my nose, in my brain, in my mouth, down my throat, flipping up my eyelids. It's inside of me, filling me up, pressure everywhere. I can feel the water in my uterus, my womb, swirling and gushing. Gushing through everything and then back out. My head pops to the surface. My face hurts and my body feels like it's exploded but somehow stayed all together in one piece. Between my legs it hurts—something's split, something's gone wrong. How did it all go so wrong? The way I've felt for months.

“Way to go, Babe!”

I have to get out of here. I let the waves push me gently against the slick face of rock, grab on with my hands and pull myself up and out of the water. My feet slip against the surface, trying to hold on. I feel the familiar imbalance, like I've once again done something I didn't want to or shouldn't have. But Jeremy's above, congratulating and calling me up. I'm so proud of you, he says.

Back at the top, Dick the guide gives us both that last arm up and pats Jeremy on the back in congratulations. But no one else wants to go and I'm wondering why when I notice a pinkish stain soaking my shorts, and a thin line of blood trickling down my leg and across my foot.

“We should go back,” Jeremy says, looking at me. For once I'm glad, and I love him for giving me this relief, this excuse to disappear back along the trail. We take off ahead of the rest, nearly running without saying a word.

Back in the suite I take a shower, hot needles stinging my body. I wash my face and under my arms and between my legs. He had already asked me to marry him by the time I found out. I wasn't thinking; it wasn't on my mind. We were already engaged and I didn't need it anymore. I started taking my birth control again. My period stopped, but I wasn't surprised; it had been disrupted other times before when I

stopped taking the pill for a while. It didn't really occur to me. I was far along, nearly five months. But I couldn't tell him, not at that point. He would have felt trapped, like I had trapped him. I had to drive all the way north up to New York State to get it done.

I pat myself dry with a thick cotton towel that smells like bleach. I touch it to my body gently, like I'm sick and every sensation is painful. I put a nightgown on over heavy cotton underwear and a pad. When I get out of the bathroom Jeremy's got clean sweats on and he's sitting on the end of the bed with his head in his hands. I've been in there a long time and there are trays of untouched room service by the door.

"I have to ask you. I don't want to, but I have to," he says finally.

"What?"

"Is there something you need to tell me?" he says.

"Nothing," I say.

"I know that you were bleeding through the sheets before," says Jeremy. "If there's something wrong just tell me."

"It's my period," I say.

"It's been longer than a month."

"It's nothing."

"Is this why you aren't my wife?" he asks.

"I don't know why I'm not your wife," I say, "but I'm not."

"Well you're going to be," he says and lays back on the bed, "I'm not going to give up."

This is touching to hear and makes me remember for a minute how I used to feel about him. How safe I used to feel when he said he would never leave me, like this was all that mattered and nothing could go wrong as long as he felt this way. When he asked me to be his wife and when I said yes. When I thought that everything was always going to be okay, before any of it happened.

“I love you,” I tell him and lay myself across his body. I kiss his neck, his shoulders, his chest, work myself down until he’s in my mouth. He doesn’t stop me and it’s easier this way, when I know that there is nothing else he will say.

Later, once I’m sure he’s asleep, I get up and walk out on the balcony and let the salty wind blow through my body, across my skin, along my arms, between my legs. It feels clean and light, like I might actually blow away. I know that we’re not supposed to be here. And I know that in the morning, I’ll pack up all of my swimsuits and tank tops and sandals and get on an airplane and fly home. And I know that when I get there I’ll pack another bag—this one with more important things—and go to stay at my mother’s place. I know that no matter what Jeremy says now, he will let me. He’ll sell the new house and send me half the money. And he’ll return all the wedding gifts to our friends and families because it’ll be the right thing to do. And he’ll have his life and I’ll have mine and these days won’t even matter in terms of how things are really going to turn out for each of us. And then we’ll never have to think of one another, or of the ocean, or of all the life that we lost.

ooo

ON DECATUR

jenny
molberg

On Decatur,
people stood in line.
The clip clop of carriages.
The man who stood, painted silver, still
as a toy soldier.

Royal Street was always quieter:
sweet cigar smoke.
The red cobblestone
that curved and buckled like muscle.

In the gallery window
was a painting I loved
of a woman sleeping
in her cocktail dress
on a silver floor, her stiletto
crooked on her ankle.

You are gone now, but there is still
the water
bursting through the levees, carrying
the painted man, the smell of chicory,
the fog in early morning,
and the painting, hanging
in the window on its
easel, tilted
in the humid air.

QUEEN WILHELMINA, IN EXILE, OTTAWA, CANADA

laura
dunn

There, the queen did her own shopping. When out,
she simply raised her hand when she wished to cross
traffic. They said— a safe haven after a country lost.
Haven, from “to have,” how could that comfort? without
the part of the world she owned. As safety furnishes,
she might have paced like Gustav Adolf IV, who wore
the carpet to wood, in agitated exile. But this queen bore
the waiting by writing her name on her purchases.
Her full name, Wilhelmina Helena Pauline Marie
of Orange-Nassau. In the Govenor General’s residence
she would not lose one more item. She carved it too, in her
bedroom door, the wood shavings on the floor lament:
Between the wood and the word, all rulers must make claim,
they act against loss, they spell their hollow name.

GEODE

brianna
mishler



LUNEBERRY GROVE

miranda
merklein

I only met the old man once, outside,
when the cable lady came and he yelled
at her repeatedly, "Fix the damn thing!"
He was lodged right between Schizo Steffan,
the intellectual who wore wrinkled
pajamas, and the brandy-for-breakfast

veteran with extra starch. At breakfast,
the old man cursed people walking outside
his door on the parking lot, his wrinkled
hands flinging out profanities. He yelled
at all of us, especially Steffan,
but Steffan never argued anything.

With the door open, hardly anything
could be seen; inside was a B&B.
His place was hospice-clean, but with stepped-on,
rolled cigarettes smashed on the floor. Outside,
the old man was limping. He didn't yell
but held up his van title, all wrinkled.

Somewhat legible (despite the wrinkles),
it might stop someone from stealing the thing.
He went back to bed and started yelling
at the manager for stalling breakfast,
but the manager never went inside
the old man's place; it was only Steffan.

He was the old man's advocate. Steffan
protected him, discounted the wrinkles,
said he was an outcast hero inside.
The old man's van was piled-up high with things
he accumulated. He had breakfast
trays from the senior home, rotting. He yelled

when it was cleaned, but Steffan didn't yell back. He was too busy "seeing." Steffan

read and ate sunflower seeds for breakfast. He ironed old wrapping paper, wrinkled from the years since his father died. The things that bothered him most didn't live outside.

Yet when the old man's things lay stacked outside, Steffan yelled at the trash crew not to touch "one wrinkle on that breakfast-table cloth!"

ooo

WHEN BERRYMAN DIED

chella
courington

He left his shoes, scuffed loafers,
on the bridge. A cordovan pair
he could have shed
anywhere: at the university
beside his desk, under Tate's coffee table,
at the foot of a lover's bed.

Every night he thought, tomorrow.
Mornings, he remembered
his suit at the cleaners, his essay
on Marlowe, students waiting
outside his office. January 7
reasons ran dry.

He bathed and trimmed his beard,
putting on a new shirt.
In eight degrees he walked
to the bridge.

TOUCHSTONE CREATIVE WRITING AWARDS

graduate fiction award

HONEYMOON

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02:10:31

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