



Diverse Voices Quarterly
Volume 3, Issue 9 & 10

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Editor's Note

I intended for *DVQ* to be a quarterly this year, but I just wasn't pleased with the bulk of submissions that I received at the beginning of the year (that and I got distracted by new love, as if that won't become apparent by some of the pieces here). So instead I made the decision to combine the first two issues into one. Hope you will find it was worth the wait!

Krisma

Diverse Voices Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 9 & 10

Cover art: *Painted Hills* by Keith Moul

CONTRIBUTORS

Martin Bayne's work has been published in *Fiction Warehouse*, *Literary Potpourri*, *Paumanock Review*, and *Warrior*. Presently retired, Mr. Bayne's background includes time spent as a journalist, paramedic, Soto Zen Buddhist monk, MIT Research Assistant, corporate CEO and virtual publisher.

Rigby Bendele is a fourth-year student at Longwood University and has served as a student editor for *The Dos Passos Review*.

Kevin Brown is an associate professor at Lee University and an MFA student at Murray State University. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *New York Quarterly*, *REAL: Regarding Arts and Letters*, *Folio*, *Connecticut Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Stickman Review*, *Atlanta Review*, and *Palimpsest*, among other journals. He has also published essays in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe*, *InsideHigherEd.com*, *The Teaching Professor*, and *Eclectica*. He has one book of poetry, *Exit Lines* (Plain View Press, 2009), a chapbook, *Abecedarium* (Finishing Line Press), and a forthcoming book of scholarship: *They Love to Tell the Stories: Five Contemporary Novelists Take on the Gospels*.

Jay Carson teaches creative writing, literature, and rhetoric at Robert Morris University, where he is also a faculty advisor to the student literary journal, *Rune*. He has published more than 60 poems in local and national literary and professional journals, magazines, and anthologies. Jay has just finished a book of his poems, *The Cinnamon of Desire*.

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Ashley Dean is a writer from the Midwest who focuses on poetry and flash fiction. She has been previously published in *Collision Literary Magazine* and

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Taylor Gould is a poet, playwright, and prose writer from Boston, Massachusetts. He is currently quitting smoking and hates it. You can find his play, *The Lights*, on Amazon.com.

Robert Hargreaves is your friendly neighborhood chicken doctor and fruit picker extraordinaire. Thirty one years as a poultry veterinarian with the California Department of Food and Agriculture, now retired. Also worked with poultry in Vietnam, Nepal, Haiti, Thailand, and Pohnpei. He was a volunteer adult literacy instructor for twenty years and civil rights worker in Mississippi 1964-65. Now writing about all this. The piece published here is an excerpt from his project *Mr. Bob the Chicken Engineer*, which you can purchase for Kindle: <http://www.amazon.com/Mr-Bob-Chicken-Engineer-ebook/dp/B004I6D2LQ>.

Charles Hayes earned his MA from the University of New Mexico and is editor of the book, *From the Hudson to the World*, Introduction by Pete Seeger (NY, 1978). He helped edit and did translations for the international homage to Pablo Neruda, *For Neruda* (Boston: 1975).

His poems have appeared in several magazines and books, and his photopoetics are published in *International Gallerie* (Mumbai) as well in various online magazines. He does photography for Peekskill, New York, and is writing a book, *Photography in Love, Shooting like Walt Whitman in the New Millennium*.

Before earning a MAW degree, in 2009, from Manhattanville College, **Dwight Hilson** spent 25 years working on business deals involving railroads, a restaurant, real estate, grain transportation and, finally, DVD publishing. Since escaping the business world, his short fiction has been published, or is forthcoming, in *The Alembic*, *Coe Review*, *MacGuffin*, *Sanskrit*, *RiverSedge* and *The Chaffin Journal* and he's currently finishing a novel set around a small town New England railroad.

A retired physician, **Timothy Holt** has long been interested in the intersection of science and art, particularly the relationship between literature and healing. A resident of New Orleans, Timm is active in the local gay HIV community, having served on both the NOAIDS task force board and the board of the New Orleans Alliance of Pride. Timm's creative work has appeared or is forthcoming in *A&U Magazine*, *Eunoia*, *Grey Sparrow*, and *Sloth Jockey*. Timm is a poet as well as a playwright, and two of his plays, *Teddy's Nightmare* and *Aurora Borealis* have been produced at the Marigny Community Theatre in New Orleans.

H. R. Hussain was born and raised in Doha, Qatar, and now lives in Oxford, Ohio, where he is a senior working on his B.A. in creative writing at Miami University.

Daniel John was raised in Saskatchewan, Canada. He is a dancer, movement & massage therapist, poet, writer, actor, and playwright. He has ten children. He is a garden and landscape designer by trade and teaches Intuitive Gardening for Brookline Adult Education. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared in many publications, including *Apalachee Review*, *The Amherst Review*, *The Comstock Review*, *descant*, *Drumvoices Revue*, *The Owen Wister Review*, *Passager*, *Phantasmagoria*, *Phi Kappa Phi Forum*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Soundings East*, and *The North Dakota Quarterly*.

Patricia Kim was born in Flushing, New York, in 1979. She is Korean-American and has a BA in psychology from New York University. She has previously worked as a case manager/housing coordinator for the homeless and mentally ill, as well as being a recreational counselor for the developmentally disabled. She began to cultivate a serious interest in poetry during college while taking several writing courses there. She has been a finalist in several poetry contests. She plans to continue her creative writing endeavors with gusto, with various projects underway.

Claire Kinnane is a 27-year-old poet living in the district. She received a master's degree in creative writing from American University in 2010 and is working on a second master's and license in secondary education at George Washington University.

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She lives in Graham, North Carolina, and is currently working on her first novel.

Bleuzette La Feir was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and is a graduate of the University of New Mexico with a Bachelor of Fine Art in theater. Through international travel she has gained inspiration from various cultures and conflict. She now writes full time and currently splits her year between her permanent home in southern Maryland and her temporary home on the island of Sicily with her partner and their dogs.

Daniel W.K. Lee is a New York City-based poet, blogger, and advice columnist. His poems have been published in various online and print journals and anthologies, including the recent anthology, *Knocking at the Door: Poems About Approaching the Other*.

E.J. Loera is an author of novels, poems, short stories, plays, and vegan recipes. When she is not writing, reading, or painting, she can generally be

found hiking with her dogs in the California high desert or daydreaming about places to which she has yet to go.

Jason McCall is from the great state of Alabama, where he currently teaches English and Literature at the University of Alabama. He holds an MFA from the University of Miami, and his poetry has been or will be featured in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *New Letters*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Fickle Muses*, and other journals.

Jessica Mason McFadden is a stay-at-home mother and recent graduate of Western Illinois University. While studying there, she was awarded the Cordell Larner Award in Poetry and was named Departmental Scholar. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming WIU's *Women's Voices Journal*, *Breadcrumb Scabs*, *Read These Lips*, *Sinister Wisdom*, and *Saltwater Quarterly*.

A resident of New York, **Stephen Mead** is a published artist, writer and maker of short collage-films. His most recent Amazon.com release, *Our Book of Common Faith*, a poetry/art hybrid, explores world religions/cultures in hopes of finding what might ultimately bond humanity. His latest project, a collaboration with composer Kevin MacLeod, is entitled *Whispers of Arias*, a two-volume CD set of narrative poems sung to music released by Lulu.com. The large oil painting *Time, Place, Place, Time* published in *Diverse Voices Quarterly* went through many digital enhancements to be presented as the film *Railroad* on YouTube.com (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zvuijt3lYbg>).

Jesse Leroy Mardian resides in Southern California where he works, plays, and sometimes writes. You may also know him by other names: Claud Winters, Marcus Moonshoes, Richard Remis, or Husky Burnwater.

Keith Moul is now sixty-five and has been publishing his poems widely for more than forty years. He has in that time written in a variety of styles, covering a variety of subjects. His PhD dissertation in 1974 consisted of alliterative verse translations from the Anglo Saxon. In recent years he's written epigrams; Blue & Yellow Dog Press released his chapbook, *The Grammar of Mind*, in November. It consists of 260 epigrammatic examinations of the mind. In 2010 he started publishing his photos and has had about 50 of them published.

Jed Myers is a Philadelphian living in Seattle. His poems have appeared most recently in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, and in the new anthology of Northwest verse, *Many Trails to the Summit* (Rose Alley Press). He collaborates in ensembles pursuing novel integrations of poetry and music, and he hosts Seattle's weekly open-mic cabaret NorthEndForum. By day, he is a psychiatrist with a therapy practice and teaches at the University of Washington.

Patrick O'Neil writes nonfiction and makes short films. His essays have appeared in numerous literary journals, most notably: *Fourteen Hills*, *New Plains Review*, *Weave Magazine*, *The Whistling Fire*, *Word Riot*, and *The Coachella Review*. His memoir, about his former life as a junkie bank robber titled *Gun, Needle, Spoon*, is busy being read by indie presses and agents. His short punk-themed documentaries have been rejected from every low-budget film festival in America. He teaches English comp at a community college to students who stare at him as if he is speaking in tongues. He currently lives in Hollywood, California and holds an MFA from Antioch University Los Angeles.

Jacob Oet grew up in Chatham, New Jersey. He ran away from his Russian nanny. The woods swallowed him. He has been lost ever since. Student by choice, Jacob Oet is never sure which language he speaks. You may spot him in a park, forest, or beach, with planted feet, arms stretched up and shaking in a breeze. But don't let him see you; he likes to sing to strangers. He takes photos of snow and hates winter.

Colleen Purcell has lived most of her life in Chile where she was a photographer. She was especially interested in photographing religious festivities in the Atacama. Her photographs have been published in *The Meadowland Review*, *Off the Coast*, *Anderbo*, *Foliage Oak*, *5x5*, and a few other publications.

An Oklahoman by birth, a Californian by choice, **Marilyn Ringer** retreats to an island in Maine for a month once a year to hike and write. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in: *Nimrod*, *Red Wheelbarrow*, *Eclectica*, *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, *Quiddity*, *Eclipse*, *RiverSedge*, *River Oak Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Porcupine*, *Left Curve*, *Milk Money*, and numerous other journals.

Robert Rothman lives in Northern California. He received an AB and J.D at the University of California at Berkeley. He is married, has children, and has had a life long attachment to open spaces and the sea.

Michael Sandler is an arbitrator, mediator and poet. He has other new work appearing in *Moment Magazine*, *The Griffin*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *California Quarterly*, *Natural Bridge*, and *Ship of Fools*.

When **Amy Tolbert** first developed an interest in photography, the only camera she owned was the very low-resolution one on her cell phone, so she downloaded some free photo-editing software, hoping that something could be done to disguise the poor image quality of her photos. Despite acquiring a much better camera, she soon became bored with her efforts to achieve "good" photography and instead developed her own style of "extreme photomanipulation."

Kim Waggoner is a 49-year-old mother of two who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007. She recently retired on disability from her job as a writer-editor for the federal government in order to focus on her health, her life, and her legacy. Her nonfiction work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Parents* magazine, and other publications. Her poetry recently appeared in *The Alembic*. Her love for the semicolon remains strong; however, she unabashedly admits to an emerging affinity for the exclamation point!

C. Rochelle Weidner's poems and short stories have appeared in *2Riverview*, *Snakeskin*, *Crime and Suspense*, *Coe Review*, and *RiverSedge*. Her works have received first place to honorable mention in a number of publication contests. Currently, she resides in Oahu, Hawaii, where she is working on a novel.

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WHEN YOU'RE YOUNG, ETERNITY SEEMS TO LAST FOREVER

by Martin Bayne

Robert Crandall reaches through layers of bourbon and psychotic depression, fumbles with his iPhone, and clears his throat. "Yes?"

"It's me. Dad?"

"Tommy?" he says, throwing off bed covers and sitting up. "Is that really you?"

"Yes, and I'm sorry for calling this late, but I want to come home."

"Oh, God, don't you think I know that? You're my flesh and blood. But it's just not possible now."

"I'm begging you, Dad. Just take me back with you for a while."

"Son, is your mother there?" As he finishes the sentence, he winces from the crushing pain in his chest.

"Yes, but I don't think she..."

He reaches for the bottle of nitroglycerin on the bedside stand.

"Let me talk to her."

As Crandall puts the tiny pills under his tongue, he imagines his wife's long, pale fingers delicately holding the phone.

"Marsha...? Honey, is that you?"

He can hear her breaths against a backdrop of total silence.

"Marsha, you don't have to say a word, just listen. I want to apologize for your present circumstances. I never intended that you and Tommy... Well, you know me when I get drinking. I do things I regret. Marsha, can you hear me?"

“Dad, she doesn’t want to talk to you. I suspect she’s pissed off—like me—about the separation.”

Crandall lights a cigarette and exhales slowly into the phone. “Is that what you think, Son, that I’m estranged from your mother? That’s not even remotely true, Tommy. I love your mother.”

“Then, why am I here?”

“I’m sorry, Son, more than you will ever know.”

“Sorry? That’s it? Do you have any idea what this place is like? The community we live in is like a bad zombie film. And if that’s not creepy enough, Mom hasn’t said two words to me since we’ve been here.”

“Son, sometimes there are things in life we have no control over and...”

“Hello?”

“Son?”

Tommy flashed the connection.

Crandall throws the iPhone on the floor and walks downstairs to the kitchen of his Boston town house. Ignoring a new flash of chest pain, he opens a bottle of Jack Daniel’s and drinks until he passes out.

Five hours later, he drags himself upstairs and into the shower, dresses, and goes to work.

On his way to the cubicle he shares with a colleague, he pauses an instant to hang up his raincoat.

“Jesus, you look terrible,” Ralph says. “I’ll get you a cup of coffee.”

Crandall stares at the photo of his wife and son on his desk and mumbles, “Thanks.”

Barry, a tall, lanky Texan who's been with the accounting firm a month, approaches Ralph in the coffee room. "What's wrong with the guy you cube with?"

"Why, is he bothering you?"

Barry hears the stinging rebuke in his voice.

"Now hold on a minute, I didn't mean nothin' by it. It's just that—well, when I passed your cube a couple of minutes ago, he was crying into the phone. And from what little I could make out, he was speaking to his son."

Ralph looks hard into Barry's eyes. "His name's Bob Crandall, and he's going through hell. I suspect he was up drinking most of the night."

"Will he be okay?"

Ralph drops empty coffee creamers into a green plastic garbage can and pauses, "No. I don't think so. A month ago, driving home late one evening, Bob passed out from drinking and hit a Mercedes head-on, instantly killing the occupants."

"And his wife and son left him after the accident?"

"In a manner of speaking," says Ralph. "They were in the Mercedes."

BIZARRO WORLD

Everything is backwards—
spheres become cubes,

Marilyn Monroe is the ugliest
woman in the word—so I am

an only child, female, probably
from some place like Oregon

that ranks high in literacy
and low in diabetes. Here, I took

my high school counselor's advice
and became an actuary who can count

the number of times she's put out
on the first date, who can turn her head

away from a *Rocky* marathon.
I talk about bootstraps and emerging markets;

I know the difference between scallions and scallops.
I don't buy Shaq albums; I can

beat Mario and Mega Man and finish
every poem I start with my eyes closed. But I don't

know that because I have no time
for games in this world,

no time for pretending I could be anything
other than what I am.

—Jason Mccall

CON

At the sales rack, I swear I'm not
one of those guys who keeps a Superman shirt tucked
under his suit at interviews, who knows
the Green Lantern oath better than the Preamble.
My girlfriend claims me in the brightest days
and the darkest nights. I don't spend my weekends stroking
the glossy cover of the new *Power Girl* with one hand
and using the other to pump
the message boards with hate for any costume
that gained a new seam in the last decade. I wouldn't know
what to do with a pair of D&D
six-sided dice. I'm just passing
time until I find a real book that I like,
until I figure out if Spiderman and Mary Jane
can make it work, until Iron Man debuts
his new armor, until Wolverine gains his memory and loses
it again, until Superman finally proves he could destroy
Batman with a sigh, until I find something here
that doesn't remind me of something
I'm missing—a power I can't grasp, a secret
word too sharp for my tongue.

—Jason Mccall

SNAPSHOT OF INFIDELITY

I have hidden from myself
many parts of myself and
you are one of them as
arresting as a
snapshot of Infidelity and I
remember summer afternoons
where you were
shaped into letters
I would never write
but that stuck to me like
oil on geese
or canvas

and it was as terrible
and beautiful
as both.

—Taylor Gould



Reading the Trees with Moonlight
—Charles Hayes

OPEN SPACE

I wouldn't have thought
 that there was so much,
such abundance
 in what isn't
 filled in;

That there is more
 where there is less
to see,
 extending
 visibility;

That on this page,
 where the words end,
in the gaps
 in-between,
 a poem is unwritten in;

That the more we love
 the less we need
to say,
 the pauses and stops
 the well bottom of talk;

So when grief bleeds through,
 why should I try
to stanch its flow
 from spreading
 the emptiness only it knows.

—Robert Rothman

SPIDER

The next day I remember
the ceiling fan crawling in shadow
weaving the same circle
over and over
the bed I found in the couch.
I watched it turn and wanted to shut my eyes
but did not, frightened to lose myself
in the dark I did not know.
Eventually the arms stopped
hurling shadows at the wall
of the hotel room.
Still I watched
the dark immobile spider—that was how
it appeared to me in that hour.
Maybe the fan could
start again, in reverse,
turning faster, then faster,
like the clock I felt my life becoming.
But no. Then,
today blurs by
like the wheel of a car on the highway
rushing past me.

—Jacob Oet

Ctrl + Return

by Cullen Cash

The moment you hit Send, you know you're fucked. Still, there's a chance if you move fast enough, you can rip the cable from the back of your computer and prevent the e-mail from blasting out to the group distribution list. Processing that thought takes less than one second and is accompanied by what feels like a full quart of adrenaline hitting your bloodstream with the force of a speedball. And so down you go, oblivious to the perilous state of your heart, which is already jackhammering an exit from your chest, into a briar patch of dust bunnies and dog-eared copies of *The Economist* and paper bag sarcophagi of rancid half-eaten lunches. Another second. You find the wire and yank it so hard that your elbow smacks the underside of your desk and launches a Starbucks cup filled with two days of tobacco spit onto the carpet next to Alvarez's foot. He recoils and fires off automatic rounds of trilled and profane vernacular, but you barely hear it because you're back on your feet in a modified three-point stance, your chair capsized next to you, your hand on the desk for support, your face six inches from the screen, searching for the parenthetical that will save your life: Outbox (1).

The outbox is empty. You click *Sent Mail* and there it is, your unintended reply to sixty-seven recipients, several of whom are so senior they haven't acknowledged you in the elevator for the two years you've been employed here. You're an analyst—which, in the hierarchy of this company, is the biological equivalent of a single-celled organism. Your role—insofar as your superiors

bother to confer one upon you, usually around 9 p.m.—is strictly defined: to create perfect Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. You have never created a perfect Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Your spreadsheets need to be triple- and quadruple-checked like Islamists moving through Reagan International Airport. You simply can't be trusted. This isn't necessarily a disqualifier for advancement—no one here trusts anyone else. Nevertheless, you'd like to be known as a can-do kind of guy, more like Alvarez, a bond math genius who speaks three languages and teaches Excel modeling to the first-years at the end of a hundred-hour week.

The death of this better, future self becomes plain as you read through the names on the distribution list a second time. You might have survived—probably not, but it's comforting to think this—if the e-mail had been limited to internal personnel. This is not the case. There are names here you don't recognize, with dreaded extensions like @davispolk.com (the firm's lawyers) and @highlandcapital.com (the firm's clients). You have never met any of these people because you're not allowed out of the building unless there is a fire. The sight of their names as recipients to one of your e-mails—*this* e-mail—has a vertiginous effect. You flip your chair over and sit.

Are you hyperventilating? You unbutton your shirt at the top and loosen your tie, causing a trapped gust of musky heat to waft out as from a crowded, long-sealed sauna. Your deodorant's chemically engineered Sport Plus fragrance has all but surrendered to superior fear and panic pheromones. You grab a tin of Skoal from your desk drawer, pinch off a big wad, and tuck into your upper lip. Time to focus. Perhaps you've overestimated the damage you've

done. You scroll down to the first paragraph and try to extract a plausible secondary meaning, but it doesn't get any better. In fact, it gets worse.

Dear Assholes, the e-mail begins.

What were you thinking? Bonuses are due to hit next week! It's impossible now to summon the rabid glee you felt as you pounded out sentences like *Suggestion 14, Analyst Showers: Helpful for washing off the scum that accumulates during any interaction with Management (NB: risks include substitution of gas for water)*.

Faded, too, is the perverse logic for hitting Reply All. Certainly you've had worse weeks. Just last month you worked three straight all-nighters. After almost seventy hours of continual sentience, the VP on the deal, Leo Kenner, screamed at you for improperly formatting a paragraph in Arial font. You were so tired and hungry and, frankly, hallucinating that you went back to your computer and changed the entire PowerPoint to Garamond—wrong again—and sent it off to the client. Kenner came around the corner a few minutes later with a heavy, corded phone bound in wire and launched at you from twenty feet. "Your new name," Kenner said by way of explanation, "is Shithead."

Probably it was an accumulation over time of grievances that caused you to snap, grievances absent not just redress but any hope for redress. That and some germ of titillation in seeing the huge block of names as addressees, the minor thrill metamorphosing with the expanding word count into a full-fledged fantasy (*I'll never send this but I could, I could*) until somebody walked behind you and you—Shithead!—freaked out. You keystroked for Alt-Tab to hide your document but instead hit Ctrl-Return and sent it.

Deep in the analyst farm, someone yells “OHHHHHH!” many decibels over the norm associated with trading blunders or porn grenades planted on homepage browsers. All around a susurrations is working its way through the vast trading floor. More people are standing now and looking your way, waiting, it seems, for something to happen, an event of some kind. This strikes you as Roman in an oblique way, maybe even older than that, the desire to bear witness to spectacle.

The spectacle is you. You’re about to get fired. The crowd-heads swivel and you follow their gaze toward the double doors of the lobby through which two guards move like bulls released from the gate. Kenner is a step behind them, wearing an expression that might be described as pre-homicidal.

They round the corner. Here they come.

Be strong, you tell yourself. Be the man who wrote the e-mail.

DEATH OF SAUDADE

One by one the watches expired
as though they had not been
stamping the cadence of time
but erasing the seconds to

at last

—Daniel W.K. Lee



Broken Clock
—Colleen Purcell

DEAR GOD

Do You get tired
bored
irritated
annoyed?

Do You get sick?

Are You ever tempted to tell us:

I give up.

You can all go to hell.

You see because we do

and since we are made in Your image
we were wondering if You have a plan
when You're feeling out of sorts?

We ask a lot of You, especially on the Sabbath.

We want You to know our feelings

it's okay to take a day off now and then

as long as You promise to come back.

—Timothy Holt

VALENTINE'S DAY

by Patrick O'Neil

I wake up to the sounds of my neighbors fucking. They just moved in a week ago. The walls are thin. She's a screamer. I saw them in the courtyard yesterday. I said hi and tried to be friendly. They ignored me and scurried into their apartment.

Their bed is banging the wall that separates us. It's the same wall my bed is against. The same wall I prop my pillows and rest my head on. We're probably less than a foot away from each other. They look like hippies, or Deadheads, or Burning Man rejects, or maybe just grungy hipsters.

She screams, "Oh my god, yes!" The bed bumps the wall.

I don't want to imagine them having sex. But it's hard not to with all this audio aid to help with the visuals. They've only been here a week, and I think they've had sex the entire time.

I'm half asleep. I have crusty eyes. My mouth is dry. It's 8:47 a.m. on a Monday morning. Can't they wait until a decent hour to fuck?

I need coffee. I need more sleep. I need to buy earplugs. I need to move out of my Hollywood low-life apartment building before I fucking kill somebody.

I get out of bed, grab my pants, and put them on. The bathroom tile is cool under my bare feet. I take a piss, brush my teeth, glance in the mirror, and un-bed head my hair with my hand. Somewhere in the apartment building next door, Madonna is singing about being like a virgin. Somehow that just doesn't seem right.

“Oh, oh, oh,” screams my neighbor. Thump goes their bed against the wall. I walk back into my room and search for a T-shirt. Picking one off the floor, I pull it over my head and look over at the massive fishtail palm that takes up half the apartment. Yesterday I replanted it to a bigger pot. It looks so happy. I want to hug it.

Through gaps in the semi-open blinds I see the building manager outside in the courtyard talking on his cell phone. He’s speaking Russian. His voice is deep. The smell of his cigarette floats in the open window. I imagine he is calling family back in the Ukraine, but he could just as easily be talking to someone a block away.

“Они имеют секс весь день. Он шальн,” he says and stamps his cigarette out on the concrete.

“Yes. Yes. Yes!” screams my neighbor.

When I turn toward the kitchen, I can hear my other equally annoying neighbor’s music—bad disco and the monotonous house music he plays nonstop. The thud of the bass vibrates the wall. If I stand exactly in the middle of the room, I hear *thump, thump*, bad music on one side. And *bang, bang*, screaming sex on the other. It’s like some demented stereo torture.

I’m going insane.

Slipping on my Chucks and sunglasses, I grab some cash off my desk and open the door. Outside the sun is bright, the air warm, the courtyard is deserted.

I walk out the back gate and through the parking lot. A bag lady looks up from rummaging in the Dumpster. I smile at her. She blows me a kiss. I look

closer. She's a man.

Out on the boulevard a scruffy midget carrying an umbrella tries to hand me a brochure for a guided tour offering a drive through Beverly Hills to see the houses of movie stars. He must be new. All the other guys hawking tours have given up on me a long time ago. I ignore him and wait for the light as two girls dressed exactly the same in pink miniskirts and orange tube tops giggle and poke each other. Their laughter is high-pitched, almost squeals, and grating on my nerves. The midget smiles as he waves a brochure in their direction. They turn away laughing.

At the coffee shop the woman at the cash register leans over the counter and hugs me. She's really cute and, for some reason, likes me. I come in every morning, and we talk about shit all nothing. She seems to think my life is glamorous. I tell her it's pretty tame. She says yeah, but you get up at eleven. You don't go to a boring job. You're always happy. You're the coolest person that comes into the store.

I smile at her and wonder who the hell she's talking about.

"It's nine-fifteen," she says, looking at her watch. "What're you doing here so early?"

"My new neighbors fuck like bunnies and they're really loud," I tell her. "They woke me up, now I'm here."

"Wow. You should film them and post it on the Internet. You know, like on YouTube."

"I hadn't thought of that," I say and wonder if this is something she does all the time. Coffee in hand, I wave good-bye and walk outside. It may be early

for me, but for Hollywood Boulevard it's just another business day as the usual mix of locals and tourists collide. A gutter punk wearing a leather jacket covered in spikes and grimy band logos points at her sick-looking dog and asks for spare change. A fat guy dressed in baggy checkered shorts and huge T-shirt with Michael Jackson's face on the front takes a picture of his equally large girlfriend as she squats on the sidewalk next to Walt Disney's star. A group of skinny kids all in black with peg-legged jeans and big hair stand around like they're posing for a CD cover.

I take a sip of coffee and watch a cop car slowly cruise the scene. Three chords off a twangy guitar and I turn around and see Elvis standing in a doorway, playing a beat-up white acoustic. He curls his lip in a sneer as he sings. "Blue, blue, blue suede shoes." Just in case you don't know it's him, he's written *Elvis Presley* in flowing script across the face of his guitar. This piece of authenticity is not lost on me. But it's way too early for Elvis. He looks really tattered and out of place in the bright morning sun. His skin's kinda gray. His dyed black hair a tad too greasy and showing blond roots. His hand shakes as he strums. Looks like Elvis could use a fix.

I buy a newspaper at the corner store and step around the midget as he tries again to interest me in a tour. Why the hell anybody would want to drive around in a topless van just to see the homes of movie stars is beyond me. Sun burnt, breathing exhaust fumes, and surrounded by Japanese tourists taking pictures is not my idea of a good time.

When I get back to my apartment, there's a lemon sitting on the stair outside my front door. Usually they just fall off the tree that's in the courtyard

and then lie there and rot, until someone picks them up and throws them away. But the lemon tree isn't right next to my apartment, so it had had to be put there—like a gift. With the edge of my foot, I kick it into the jumble of spinney succulents that are taking over the patch of dirt the dead roses used to rule. I don't trust my neighbors. I don't want their offerings. Who knows where that lemon's been?

Leaving the door open to let the warm air in, I sit at my desk and look at the computer. Popping the lid off my coffee, I take a sip and then scan my e-mails and see nothing but ads for offshore pharmacies selling Viagra and offers to enlarge my penis.

I wonder if movies stars in their fancy houses get e-mails for penis enlargement. Or are they too busy avoiding vanloads of tourists parked in their driveways?

I'd really just like to go back to bed. Go to sleep. Then wake up and start this day again.

"Fuck me. Fuck me harder," screams my neighbor.

TANTRA

by Daniel John

Tantra: a Hindu system of using sexual energy to attain enlightenment. After arousal, usually while in a sitting position, instead of orgasm, the practitioners move the energy up the spine to the head and out.

After our class at the School for Body-Mind Centering, a school for movement therapy, I walked Sybil home to downtown Amherst, Massachusetts. I was 32 and she was 39. At 5'10", she was about two inches taller than I was, with long, wavy, walnut-brown hair, and green eyes that were always changing implications. We sat on a park bench beneath a maple tree that looked like a man's head in flames and talked about marriage and divorce for hours.

"My apartment is next door," she said as she stood up to leave. "Come on over sometime."

My full cup of coffee flew out of my hands. Sybil exploded in laughter. There was coffee on my face, shirt, pants, shoes, and all through my curly brown hair, as well as in little puddles around my feet.

* * *

The next day I walked her home. "Could you fix me some coffee?" I asked her. I thought it might clear my sinuses and my poor swollen prostate as well. She started to, but in her tiny kitchen we kept bumping into each other until we kissed like refugees reunited. My sinuses cleared instantly. After several breathless minutes she pulled away and walked into the bed/living room. I followed, dazed. We knelt on the floor next to the bed, knees touching, and kissed so deeply and for so long, I felt as if my face were

melting into hers.

“This is real tantric sex!” she said, beaming, after ten minutes of kissing.

“I guess I’m meeting my karma,” I said, painfully shifting my legs. “I practiced tantra for years, trying to turn sex into spirit.”

She stood up and left the room.

A long time later, she came back in a gray business suit. She sat on her knees in front of me and composed herself. “I’m just choosing to use the energy for something else.”

“That’s what I told myself for years.”

She left again, without a word.

Half an hour later, just as I was about to give up and go home, she walked in wearing a filmy, blue negligee over tiny underwear. “Let’s sleep now,” she announced, then got under the covers and rolled over to face the wall. Confused, I undressed and got in next to her, careful not to touch. My erection throbbed away in its little tent. Hours later, I was still awake and still erect when she pulled me on top of her and, with a painful chafing, jammed me inside her, then moved like an earthquake beneath me. The swelling in my prostate condensed into a hard-boiled egg that exploded out of me with a great deal of pain. Tears rose to my eyes from a place that had never wept, then wet my cheeks with sleep. I’d been celibate for many months, not even masturbating, to save my sexual energy for God.

I opened my eyes at dawn to see Sybil climbing on top of me with her magnificent marble-pillar thighs and engulfing the morning erection that had

no right to be there after the night before. A powerful peace radiated from our joining and saturated the room with the sacred. Invisible sparkles of happiness and delight filled the air. She rode me like a horse. My ex-wife had never done anything like that. "God wants you to come," Sybil said, riding up and down in my saddle. "He wants you to come lots and lots." I was offended to hear such talk of God. The sacred feeling faded away and so did my erection.

* * *

Late that night I went outside for a smoke behind the little house where I rented a room. All day I'd been worried about having too much sex. All the spiritual disciplines I'd ever heard of said loss of sperm led to weakness of body, mind, and soul: dissipation. A cold wind tossed bits of rain at the dead leaves with a dry, crackling sound. In defiance of God I wrote poetry about sex and Sybil until long after midnight.

* * *

Dusk was overtaking the day with danger as I started walking the three miles under the silvery full moon of October to Sybil's apartment and the oblivion of sex. As I crossed Amherst Common, the air filled with the unearthly beauty of a huge male chorus chanting praises to God. Mesmerized, I followed the music on to the Amherst College campus to a classical New England brick building. The Kyrie Eleison was pouring out of a second-story window. A woman in blue jeans burst out the door and ran, laughing, up to me, thinking I was an old friend. I wasn't. She left the door wide open behind her. Students with feet on the furniture shouted at each other over the

blaring of a large-screen TV. Two people wrapped in sheets stumbled down a hallway strewn with toilet paper. A car jerked to a halt next to me, leaving raw tire gashes in the grass. Yelling students poured out, along with the stink of beer. The heavenly music was abruptly turned off with a loud scrape of the needle, leaving the night filled with the sounds of drunken revelry and verbal abuse. God's message was clear: Celibacy was my debauchery; sex was my salvation.

* * *

Sybil led me to bed. I undressed and lay next to her, anxious and frightened. "I'm very tired," she said, turning her face to the wall. Greatly relieved, I went to sleep. My erection didn't. After midnight she mounted me like a soft, white-skinned creature from the female deep. Wracking sobs tore out of my throat when I came, and I wept copious, ancient tears that should have been released when Christ was crucified.

* * *

I avoided her for days. Then one afternoon, when I was walking home from class, she pulled up beside me. I got in her car and felt too close to her. I shut the door and felt imprisoned. "Guess what? I got my period! I know it's because of you and your male juices. I've had no period for a year! I thought I was in menopause! I feel like a woman again! Even the cramps make me happy!" We drove to a Chinese restaurant to celebrate.

When we stood up to leave, we stuck to each other like Saran Wrap clings to itself. With difficulty, we separated to get in the car. Every movement she made was unbearably erotic, every green-eyed glance was a kitten

crawling under my clothing.

“We’re going to make love in your bed,” she said happily.

“No! We can’t!” I slammed my foot down on the imaginary passenger-side brake.

“Why not?”

“Because of my housemates. They’d be real upset to hear us.” She eyed me suspiciously.

I broke into high-pitched giggles. “...Really?”

“Yes, honest! I just can’t. Let’s get together tomorrow night.”

She stopped the car. I flung open the door—“Wait!” My eyes flickered around the car like a trapped animal’s. “Daniel. Listen to me. I am an angel. God sent me to you, to have you come in me. I need your male juices.” I leaped out of the car, giggling hysterically. I could not stand it when she talked about God like that.

* * *

The next night in her apartment she pulled away when I tried to hug her. I sat up in bed to meditate. Several minutes later she said, “I can feel you leaving me. Your spirit just receded.” I opened my eyes. Every object in the room glowed with a magical peace and purity. My body was only an envelope, and I was the letter inside it, returning to God. Physical sensation was so far beneath me, I was hardly aware of—Sybil bit my ear. Feeling rippled through my body like a spring thaw. She nibbled on down my cheek. With a massive effort, I lifted a numb hand and touched her face. An erection rose like the miracle of life, its phallic eye open to a vision of truth that Empty Mind could

never see, and we made love with God, for God, and in God.



Time, Place, Place, Time
—Stephen Mead

GEOMETRY

God lives in the angles
of a trapezoidal bedroom.
I have seen him in the corners,
his arc extended to my cheek,
his tangents, playful linear angels,
arrow-tipped, directional.

What formulas exist
to cosine the divine,
find the unknown X,
the other side of understanding,
the symmetry of numbers,
this language without words?

I plot the coordinates.
The graph of the heart is round.

—Marilyn Ringer

ODE TO THE SEMICOLON

Oh, period perfectly perched atop a comma;
longer than a comma, but shorter than a period.
A stutter step;
the perfect pause.
Like a good-night kiss on the first date
that neither ends too quickly nor lingers too long.
The promise of more to come;
sweet semicolon.

—Kim Waggoner

PUMPKIN PIES

by Robert Hargreaves

The pumpkin has never traveled very well. Even in today's global world the round orange squash so familiar to Americans is still unique to North America. I was an agricultural volunteer with International Voluntary Services (IVS), the predecessor to the Peace Corps, in Vietnam from 1965 to 1967. For my first Thanksgiving in Vietnam in 1965, IVS gave a canned ham to all the volunteers. I should have been thankful but I wanted turkey. Hey, I'm a poultry specialist! But there were no turkeys to be found in Vietnam, not even in the military PX. At least not fresh ones—they did have canned turkey, and canned pumpkin, whipped cream. Now I had the fixings for a real Thanksgiving. I even got white potatoes for the mashed potatoes and gravy. White potatoes don't do well in the tropics, and Dalat, in the mountains just west of my home in Phan Rang, was the only place in Vietnam that grew white potatoes. They were tiny, only two inches across, but hey, it worked.

All that was too much to eat by myself. Besides, what's Thanksgiving without a big gathering of friends and family? So I invited all the Vietnamese specialists I was working with and put on the spread.

I ran into trouble on the pumpkin pies. I couldn't find the spices I needed, and it was too late to go back to the PX in Saigon. No one in the marketplace could help me. The proprietors of the small restaurant where I ate for \$10 a month never heard of them. This is the Far East, right? Isn't this where spices come from? There were names for all of the spices I was looking

for in my English-Vietnamese dictionary, so they should be in Vietnam. I finally learned the spices I was looking for were in the Chinese medicine shop, right in with the ground tiger bones, bear bile, and cow placentas. And the nutmeg was a whole seed I had to grind myself.

Next problem—where to bake the pies? The Vietnamese cooked on charcoal and didn't use ovens. I didn't have an oven. I finally arranged to use the ovens in the military advisor's compound, just in time for my dinner. I made four pies: a lime meringue, an apple, and two pumpkins. I made an extra pumpkin pie to make sure I had some left over for myself.

The dinner was a big success, except for the pumpkin pies. None of my guests had ever seen or heard of a pumpkin pie before. What's a pumpkin? Well, it's a kind of squash. The only squash they were familiar with was related to the zucchini. Here was something brown and squishy. No one would even try it. The lime meringue and apple pies quickly disappeared. Now I had two whole pumpkin pies to myself. Delicious.

MEN, BODY IMAGE, AND THE STUPID THINGS WE DO TO OURSELVES

by Kevin Brown

A few years ago, as my girlfriend and I were getting ready to leave my house, she turned to me and said, “You know, I now understand what it’s like to live with an anorexic.” Needless to say, her comment surprised me, even though I had made a comment about wanting to lose weight from my stomach. I’m 5’8” and, at the time, weighed between 145 and 150 pounds. I ate a reasonably healthy diet, and I was training for a marathon. Thus, I was clearly at a healthy weight, eating well, and taking good care of my body, which begs the question of why she would compare me with someone suffering from anorexia. I asked her to explain.

She pointed out that she did not think I was living in an unhealthy manner, but she told me that she thought I did not have a true view of my body. While I always focused on my gut, no matter what I was wearing or doing, she told me that it wasn’t noticeable. At all. When I saw myself in the mirror or in pictures, though, that was the first place my eyes went. She pointed out that, since I didn’t see myself correctly, I still wanted to lose the weight off of the gut, much as an anorexic never sees himself or herself as skinny enough. The truth is that I didn’t really care about losing any more weight, but it was the only way I could think of to lose the inches off of my waist.

The perception in our society is that only women suffer from body image problems, which leads them to do some rather unhealthy things to their

bodies. However, men have struggled and are struggling to deal with these issues too, as I can well attest. When I was in graduate school, I gained a significant amount of weight. Most of my time was spent reading or writing papers, and I often had night classes, so the drive-thru on the way to class was the most convenient meal I could think of. After nearly four years, I had peaked at 215 pounds. I had tried doing a bit of exercise to lose weight, and, of course, I tried doing sit-ups to lose the flab from the middle, but I was not having much luck. At that time, my parents were getting rid of their treadmill, so they gave that to me: Nothing like a gift that says, “you need to lose weight”. However, I was tired of simply trying a bit of exercise, so I developed a diet, as well.

In addition to the fast food, I was also simply eating large amounts of food, food that usually was not healthy. I could fix an entire box of Tuna or Hamburger Helper and eat it all myself. I usually drank several soft drinks a day, sometimes getting close to ten per day. I calculated that I was probably eating 4000 to 5000 calories a day, and I was doing little to no exercise. Something had to change, so I changed it radically. I cut my caloric intake to less than 2000 calories a day, and I tried to get rid of all the fat from my diet (something I now know better than to do). I also started walking on the treadmill, though my first walking workout lasted roughly ten minutes since I was in awful shape.

All of this sounds like a solid, healthy workout plan; however, I was not an adventurous eater, so I had few choices for meals. I also grew up eating a good deal of prepared foods, so that’s what I knew how to fix and what I

enjoyed. Since I was also trying to completely rid fat from my diet, I ate a good deal of fat-free products, which are only partially real food. All of this combined to give me a diet that was not healthy. For breakfast, every day, I ate a breakfast bar and had a glass of 2% milk—I was raised on whole milk, and I had to work myself down to fat-free milk. Lunch, every day, was a fat-free hot dog with ketchup and mustard and a fat-free chocolate pudding. Dinner was when I allowed myself a bit of variety. Half of my dinner was always macaroni and cheese, which I made with elbow macaroni, Healthy Choice fat-free cheese (which looks like plastic and tastes rather similar, as well), and a bit of milk. The other half was either a can of pork and beans or pinto beans. I always drank water for lunch and dinner.

The only smart tactic I found was to allow myself one dinner out, which was easy since I taught part-time at a school two hours north of where I lived. However, I always chose something from a fast food place, usually Hardee's, Domino's, or Arby's. When I taught out of town more than once a week, which eventually happened, I would take my dinner, which would then consist of a couple of sandwiches (usually ham and fat-free cheese) with some sort of fruit side (grapes or bananas, mostly).

When I told a class about my diet a few years ago, a health science major looked horrified and rightly so. He said incredulously, "I didn't hear any fruits or vegetables mentioned." I just smiled and said, "That's because there weren't any." Before I started teaching out of town more than one night a week, I didn't eat any fruits and vegetables for months. I was on this diet for a year and a half, with my only breaks coming from trips out of town to visit friends and

family. I would let up on the diet then, but I would still work very hard to control what I ate.

The results confirmed that I was doing what was correct, though. In the first two months, I lost close to twenty pounds, getting close to thirty by the end of the third month. Of course, as with all diet and exercise plans, there were ups and downs, but, by the time I moved a year and a half later, I had lost seventy pounds, and I could walk much longer than ten minutes at a stretch. I would not advise anyone to do what I did, but I was desperate and ignorant, and I got results.

I would not argue that, at 215 pounds, I was anywhere near my ideal weight, but many men are, yet they still feel pressure to lose weight. When people talk about unhealthy lifestyle changes (such as mine) or something more severe, such as anorexia or bulimia, they often cite the pressure on women, which is definitely there. We always point out that the average female model is 5'11" and weighs 117 pounds, while the average twentysomething-year-old woman is 5'4" and 156 pounds. However, people often ignore male models and actors when talking about men's body image. The average height for a male model is between 5'11" and 6'2" with a weight of between 140 and 165 pounds. The average height for a twentysomething-year-old man is 5'9" and the average weight is 183 pounds. That means that the average twentysomething male has a BMI of 27, which is above the norm and tops out at 25, but not by all that much, and it's certainly well below the 30 that would categorize him as obese. However, he has to compare himself to the male model who comes in with a BMI of between 18 and 23. While this is certainly better

than the female model's BMI of 16.3, most men simply cannot imagine losing enough weight to get to an 18 BMI, nor should they. The people we see on television and in movies do not help the situation either. Johnny Depp, for example, one of the best-known cinematic heartthrobs, is 5'10" and 155 pounds, with a BMI of 22.2.

What men see affects how they see themselves, which leads them to an unrealistic view of themselves. According to a *Men's Health* survey in September 2007, three out of four men say they are too heavy, and one in three men equate obesity with weakness. Many of them either do something unhealthy or consider doing so to lose weight. Two in five give up their favorite food, an approach that almost guarantees failure, and one in three said that they would "risk their health and take an illegal drug if it guaranteed weight loss." The average man loses five pounds on his diet and gains it back in four months. One in four are unable to keep to the diet for a month, and only one in five can do so for a year.

Not surprisingly, more and more men, just like women, are finding plastic surgery an easy alternative. In fact, men and women are so similar in this regard that, if one were to list four of the five top procedures for men, most people would think they were talking about women: nose reshaping, eyelid surgery, liposuction, and breast reductions. The fifth is hair transplantation. More and more men are having six-pack implants, pectoral implants, and buttock enhancements in an effort to measure up to the ideal male that they see in magazines, on television, and in movies.

They're also developing eating disorders much more frequently than in

the past. According to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA), approximately 10% of people seeking treatment for eating disorders are now male. They discuss studies that show that men with eating disorders are influenced more by a desire to be thinner than by family or psychological variables and that they prefer a “lean, toned, thin” body as opposed to the typical V-shaped body most men strive for.

However, this V-shaped body also causes problems of its own. When men are not trying to lose weight, they’re often trying to gain it in order to have a clearly defined muscular physique. An obvious problem here is steroids, but average men who are simply trying to look more muscular seldom use steroids. Those who become obsessed with doing so or who become interested in body building are tempted there, but most men are not (though the statistic from *Men’s Health* reminds us that they would probably do so if there were no side effects).

It is here that the media truly shape men’s images of themselves. The NEDA points out that magazines targeting women include articles focused on dieting and weight reduction, while magazines for men contained articles on fitness, weight lifting, and muscle toning instead. We hear stories about Christian Bale losing 60 pounds for his role in *The Machinist*, then gaining 100 pounds for his role as Batman, and we think that we can do the same. I was a fan of Will Smith back when he was a skinny kid on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, but I find myself obsessed with his biceps ever since he gained close to 30 pounds of muscle for his role in *Ali*.

Most men hear these stories and wonder why they are unable to do the

same. In a study of Taiwanese men discussed in the June 2005 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, men from different countries were asked how much weight they would need to gain (in muscle, of course) to have “average” muscularity and a “body type most preferred by women.” Taiwanese men were most comfortable with their bodies, as they felt they only needed to gain ten pounds. Men in Western countries (France, Austria, and the United States) felt they needed to gain at least twenty pounds, with American men believing they needed to gain even more, closer to twenty-five pounds. Not surprisingly, the study pointed out that Taiwanese magazine advertisements seldom portray men undressed or semi-dressed, unlike American magazines. One need only to remember Mark Wahlberg’s Calvin Klein ads to understand why American men might feel inferior.

I would like to say that I am immune to such tactics since I am clearly aware of them; however, recently, I became sucked in by them. Most of my life, I was a scrawny kid. In middle and high school, I was always the smallest boy in my class (in high school, my best friend was shorter than I was, but he was clearly stronger since he spent summers hanging tobacco with his grandfather). One friend of mine wanted to play football so badly that he put wrenches in his pad pockets and ate baby food to gain weight before the weigh-in just to make it to the required eighty pounds; I was smaller than he was, though not by much. My parents were even concerned enough to put me on protein drinks to help me gain weight, but I didn’t like the taste, so I did not drink them on a regular basis.

Thus, after several years of lifting weights rather haphazardly, when I

saw that I was gaining some muscle and could lift more than I ever had, I began to get a bit obsessed again, just like with my diet from years before. I started reading articles in body building magazines, and I even bought some protein powder that one of my students uses (and I can tell a clear growth in his muscles over the past year). Luckily, I am smarter than I used to be, so I developed a sensible plan with rest days and easy days to avoid injury.

However, I am not as smart as I would like to think. A few weeks ago, before I left on a school trip to Boston, I went to the weight room the day before we left town to see if my max had improved any. Note that I had been following my plan for three weeks, at best. Also note that I did not have a spotter that morning. And, last, note that, not only did I not have a spotter, there was no one in the weight room that morning. Needless to say, I ended up with a bar on my chest that I was unable to get off. I eventually worked half of it high enough to hook on to the catch, and I then lifted the other side up enough to get out from under it, but I ended up with a bruise on my right pec that lasted most of the two weeks we were out of town.

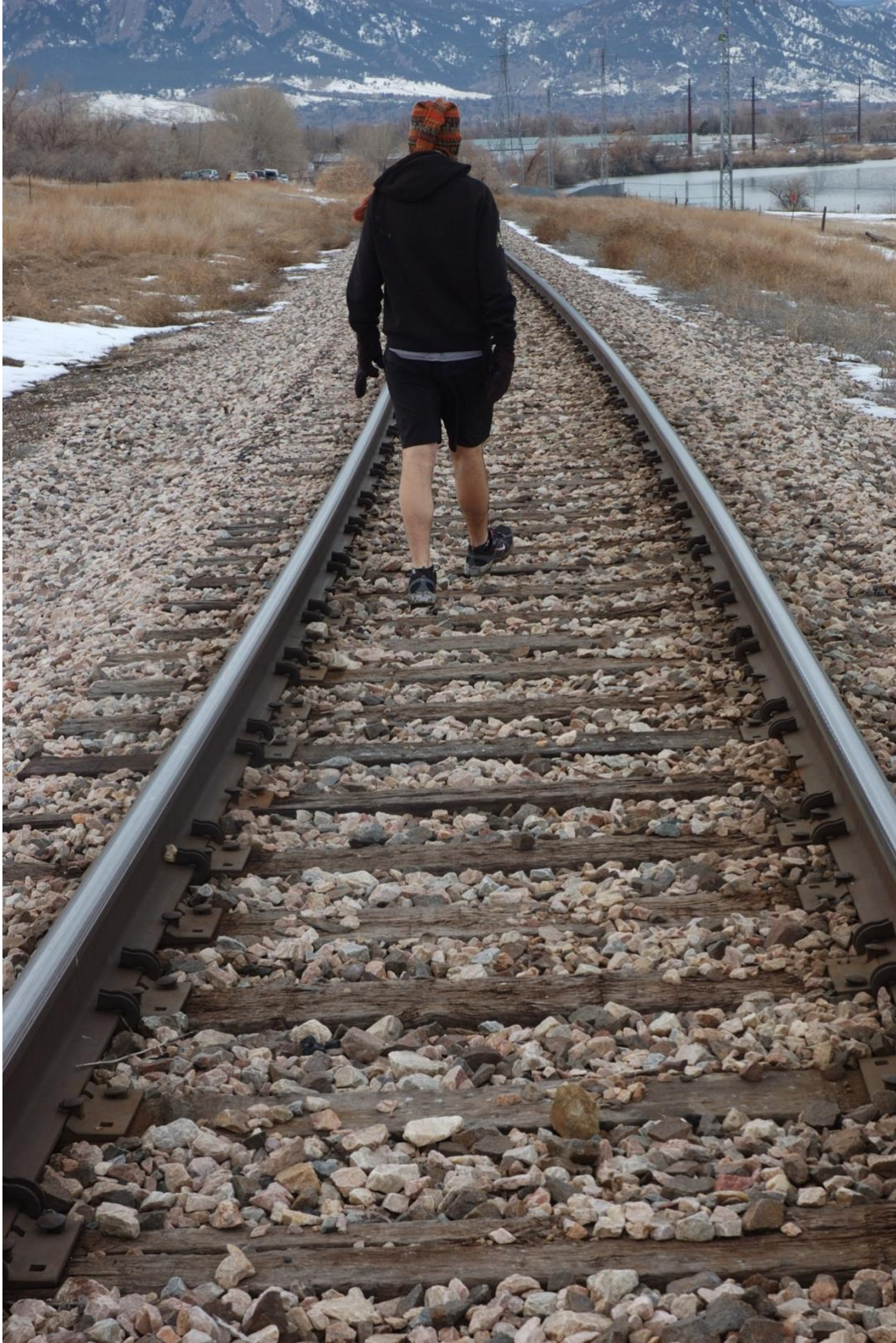
Of course, I was lucky. When I was on the bench, the bar was rolling toward my neck when it got down, and I was terrified it would slip off of my fingers. I also told a colleague of mine, who used to be a serious weight lifter, that I had thought about rolling it down my stomach to my waist to enable me to stand up with it. He informed me that doing so could have broken ribs and punctured my lungs. I'm rather glad I ended up with just a bruise. A few weeks later, the thought of what could have happened when I was on the bench kept me up with a level of fear and terror I have not felt in years.

Unfortunately, more and more men are willing to do stupid, unhealthy things to their bodies—all to live up to some ideal that our culture presents to us. We forget that, in order to look like Muhammad Ali, Will Smith trained like him for an entire year and that few of us have that kind of time or money to devote to staying in shape. Instead, we look to fad diets and plastic surgery, which can devastate our bodies, or we adopt training plans that are well beyond what we are capable of. In every case, we look for quick fixes that will inevitably cause us health problems for years to come, if not the rest of our lives.

These approaches remind me of a female student I taught several years ago. She was giving a speech on diet pills and how awful they are for our bodies. Her speech was quite persuasive, since she listed the various side effects and regaled the class with story after story of people who had suffered and died after using them. She even had visual aids; she had brought an entire basket full of different types of pills, so that the students would know exactly what she was talking about. At the end of her speech, a student asked a simple question: “Have you ever used them?” She smiled sheepishly, then told us that she has used them and that she still did, even knowing all of the problems with them. She admitted that it wasn’t smart, but she wanted to stay in great shape, and these pills enabled her to do so.

Men have not had to struggle with these unrealistic expectations in the same way that women have. Many of the male heroes were average-looking men whom most of us could compete with, but, now, the media and society are presenting an unrealistic view of men, as well, and more and more men are

spending their time in offices or their cars, making it difficult for them to find the time, energy, or means to keep up. It is no surprise, then, that Alexander Mussap writes in his study, "Masculine Gender Role Stress and the Pursuit of Muscularity," that "There is a general consensus (i) that sociocultural pressures on men's body image are increasing; (ii) that the promotion of an unrealistic male body ideal has encouraged a desire for leanness and muscularity; and (iii) that the greater investment in appearance by many men has led to a stronger sense that deviations from the male ideal are unattractive, unacceptable, and a source of dissatisfaction and distress." Thus, just like my student, men are more and more willing to do anything necessary to look like the latest action hero. I've certainly done my share of idiotic diets and absurd weight routines, but I've decided not to try to look like Will Smith anymore. He has time and money beyond what I could ever carve out of my life. Plus, he has big ears. I'll try to remain satisfied with my body, small ears and all.



Walking Away
—Colleen Purcell

THE EARLY HOURS OF *EID*

by H. R. Hussain

Eid. My not-so-favorite time of year. Think of it like Christmas for Muslims, but we get it twice a year: once during the pilgrimage season and another the day after the month of Ramadan, otherwise known as today. We're not celebrating the birth of anyone, and, sadly, we're not getting presents either. Instead, we're celebrating the completion of a month of fasting for all Muslims around the globe, and we do so by going to the homes of all our friends and family to celebrate the togetherness of our community.

Bull. Shit. I'd rather fast another month.

Truthfully, the *Eid* morning prayer is my favorite part of the day. And I'm not even religious. Do I believe in a god? On a good day, maybe. But *Eid* isn't a good day, so today I'm an atheist. Besides, I'm gay. Allah isn't a fan of the gays.

Of course, there is a reason why I like *Eid* morning prayer. It isn't because I hate the rest of the day so much. It's the imam. I wish I could say it right now to my brother. Just lean to the left and whisper, "Hey, see the imam? He likes dick. He likes my dick." Or maybe lean to the right to my dad and go, "That's my boyfriend!"

Sigh.

"Keep it down," my brother whispered. "I know how awful this part is, but it's just five more minutes. Stop sighing."

"Not what I was sighing about," I replied and went back to staring at Khalid. I might as well since this is the only time I'll see him all day. *Eid* is

such a mess because we have to be up at four in the morning and be at the mosque at least an hour before sunrise for a little pre-prayer prayer. This is the time of year that Allah is said to be closest to us minions stuck here on Earth, as if He will take His hands off His ears and finally give a crap about us.

Khalid was going on about the ethics of *Eid* and the meaning behind it, adding something about why we had *Eid* to begin with. I love that story. It's hilarious. The Muslims around the Prophet were sad they had nothing to celebrate while the Jews in the city did. So Allah said to the Prophet that they have two celebrations now, the two *Eids*, and they needed nothing more because it was from Allah. The end.

Forget Mother's Day tomorrow that my mom was bugging me about, or the surprise birthday party we're throwing for my brother next week, or even better yet my sixth-year anniversary with Khalid in two months. We're not celebrating any of that. It's not from Allah, so why bother? It's not like He was the one who said, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another." Technically, my family is from Allah. Technically, Khalid is from Allah. Loving and celebrating them is just in my righteous, faithful nature so that I may know them. I just can't help it.

"Brothers and Sisters," yelled Khalid in that typical melodramatic preacher tone that every religion seems to have. "Raise your hands with me so that Allah may hear our prayer." Sure. I'll raise my hands. It won't be the first time I raise anything for you, Khalid. Sigh. My brother nudged me and gave me a glare. I don't like this part at all. Maybe I'll just do my own little prayer for

once. At least I'll mean it.

Dear Allah, what up? Is that appropriate? I'mma talk informal to you here since you're closer to us and all. I figure we can see things eye to eye. I was hoping you'd give me this one thing. I don't ask for much, but I bet you hear that a lot, so scratch that. I'd say I'd make you a deal that I'll pray more, but we both know better. Honestly, Al—can I call you Al? I think you owe me. All this “love each other and do your best, and I'll be the only Judge in the end” doesn't really work itself out when you say “but kill the homos.” So if you want my damn prayers, start fixing that! Until then all you're getting is a big ass fuck you.

Amen.

I ended with an imaginary finger to the air, covered in all its rainbow and glittery glory for that extra pinch of gay measure. Wouldn't want Him to forget who it was from.

“Tameem,” my brother nudged.

“Would you quit nudging me the whole damn time?” I snapped.

“Dad's looking at you.”

I turned to my right and he was. Shit. You know you fucked up bad when Dad breaks his prayer because of you. I looked down quickly and pretended to join Khalid's prayer.

“Amen,” we all kept repeating in one couldn't-care-less, please-end-our-misery voice after each prayer until we were done. I got up quickly and hurried to the shoe rack to get my dad's shoes. This day just got that much worse now that I have to suck up to my own dad the entire way through.

We got in the car, and my brother turned on the radio so we could listen

to the exact same *Eid* song they play each year for over eighteen years now. I wish Lady Gaga would spare us the misery and just write a new one.

“So how many houses are we visiting this year, Dad?” I asked half jokingly, half scared for the answer. We usually visit thirty-six. It takes us from 7 a.m. to around noon to visit them all, if we play our cards right and don’t get held back at any one house. When I said we visit all our friends and relatives, I meant *all* our friends and relatives. A strategy is a must.

“I think we have thirty-two this year,” my brother answered to fill my dad’s silence. “A few of them are spending *Eid* abroad this year.”

Lucky fucks.

“We should do that next *Eid*. What do you think, Dad?” I tried again without much luck. All I got was a glare. My dad is a very traditional person. Mentally, I know he’s already crossed off those few people that left this year because they broke cultural tradition and didn’t spend *Eid* in their country with their families. Such unfathomable blasphemy it is to do what you want.

I adjusted myself back in my seat and got out my phone to text. “I’d rather deal with your morning breath than my dad right now. Love you no hetero.”

“Okay, first stop,” Jamal announced. “Aunt Aisha’s.”

“Tameem.” My dad turned around from his seat and looked at me. “Your cousin Noor will be in there. I want you to look at her real good. She’s twenty-three, and a two-year gap is perfect for a new couple.”

Oh great. This again.

“Look, you’ve been a mess in your life and that’s because you’re not

married. The only person keeping you down the Righteous Path right now is the Imam Khalid.”

I almost gagged.

“Honestly, the two of you just need to find good Muslim girls, and you’ll be set.”

“But Dad...”

“Just talk to her.” It wasn’t a request. My phone vibrated and my brother glared at me before I could take a look at it.

“What is with this family and glaring?” I said as I got out of the car.

We went inside and Aunt Aisha was sitting there next to good old Noor, who immediately looked down as soon as we came into vision, as if the designs on the carpet suddenly became visible to the naked eye. My dad borrowed the phone to call relatives who live abroad, and Jamal was talking to my aunt, leaving me with, of course...

“How are you, Tameem?” asked Noor while still paying complete attention to the intricate red and gold lines, in case they decide to switch colors or shapes on her without notice.

“Oh, you know.” I looked down and studied the lines with her. I can see now why they were interesting. And then I started a quickie prayer.

Dear Al. See this girl, Noor? I’m trying not to either. But she really needs help. Well, I really need your help. Can you find her another man, maybe? I’m not into this whole cousin thing. Especially not ones that come with vaginas because thank you, but no thank you. Help a brother out? Homosexually yours, T

I brought my vision back to human level, and my dad got off the phone.

He, of course, was glaring at me.

“Nobody is answering,” he said to Aunt Aisha. “We’ll try again when I stop by next time.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” she replied. “I have better news to share with you right now, Brother. It’s Noor, she’s getting married.”

Oh, sweet Mother of Gaga, you did it Al!

“That’s wonderful news,” my dad said, though I could hear the disapproval in his voice.

I turned around to Noor and said, “*Mabrook!*” It came off a bit more enthusiastic than I intended, but it was a reason for celebration, and I was just happy.

“Do we know the guy?” Jamal asked.

“Yes,” said Aunt Aisha. “Actually, he said he knew Noor through you, Tameem.”

Now, everyone was staring at me. Well, almost everyone. I knew two of them were glares. I had to pause from my celebrations to pick my jaw up from the exquisitely designed floor.

“Me?” I pointed at myself. She laughed on her own.

“Of course you. He’s a really good young man. Very righteous. His name’s Khalid. He went to high school and college with you?”

“The Imam?” asked my dad. “Yes, he and Tameem are best friends. How didn’t you know of this? What kind of friends are you?”

I didn’t answer.

“Well, it wasn’t him that approached us; it was his father, of course. And

it only happened last night. To be perfectly honest, he did mention that Khalid had issues, but it's good that his father knew to seek the answer in Allah and is pushing him to get married. He told us that Khalid is a God-fearing young man, and all he needs is a good woman by his side, just like Noor." She paused, looked at me, and smiled. "Oh, don't look like that, Tameem. I'm sure he just didn't have time to tell you with *Eid* preparations and all."

No, but apparently he had the time to fuck me and not mention it. I needed an excuse to use the bathroom.

"Aunt Aisha, you're not drinking your orange juice. Let me pour you some more."

I got her glass and started pouring it full just so I could...

"Tameem!" yelled Jamal. "Look at the mess you made."

"I'm so sorry, Aunt Aisha. I really didn't mean to."

I ran off toward the bathroom and locked the door. I wanted to call and yell out all my emotions at the motherfucker, but I knew I couldn't. You don't hide in the closet for twelve years and not learn how to keep it a secret. I got my phone out and dropped it before I could even look at it. It scratched on the screen. What a perfect metaphor.

There was a text from earlier that I couldn't get to. It was from Khalid: "Enough." I hit reply without thinking twice: "Enough? Enough isn't enough words to fucking break up with someone you've been with for almost six years. And for her? Is this a fucking joke?"

I threw the phone on the ground and stomped on it.

"Tameem?" Jamal's voice came from the other side of the door. "Are you

okay in there?”

“I’m fine. Just trying to rinse the juice, but I keep knocking stuff over. Tell Aunt Aisha I’m sorry, again.”

I picked up the cell phone pieces and flushed the little ones down the toilet while shoving the bigger ones in my pocket. I stayed on the bathroom floor and time paused. All I could hear was the toilet overshadowing the whispers outside the door. When it stopped I recognized my dad’s voice.

“I think he’s upset.”

“Maybe we should take him home,” my brother suggested.

“No, this is good.” Good? How the fuck is this good?

“What do you mean?”

“He’s realizing his friend is getting married before him, and he doesn’t want to feel left out. You know, being the only single guy in his group of friends. I think it really got to him, mostly because it was the girl he wanted.”

I looked up, raised my hands, and closed my eyes.

Dear Al. Who the fuck do you think you are? Are you getting some kind of sick, twisted pleasure out of all of this? All because you have no sense of humor? Haven’t you put me through enough already? You know what... You know what? Why do I even bother talking to fictional characters?

I picked myself up, looked in the mirror, and took a moment.

“Three things,” I said. “You don’t need to do this. You just need to remember three things you’re grateful for.”

“Tameem?” My dad called. “Who are you talking to?”

“One: My dad is locked outside.”

“What? Speak up, I can’t hear you.”

“Two...”

He knocked on the door.

“Two. Two...”

“We’re all waiting for you. You’re being incredibly rude.”

“Two...Two: There is no god. I make my own rules.”

I hear more knocks. Louder knocks.

“Three...”

“Tameem!” My brother called out.

“Please...three. Three.”

“Open this door right now.”

“You can do it. Just one more...”

“Come out!”

I turned around and opened the door.

“Three: I’m gay.”

Without hesitation my dad spat on me, grabbed me by the arm, and shoved me toward the entrance.

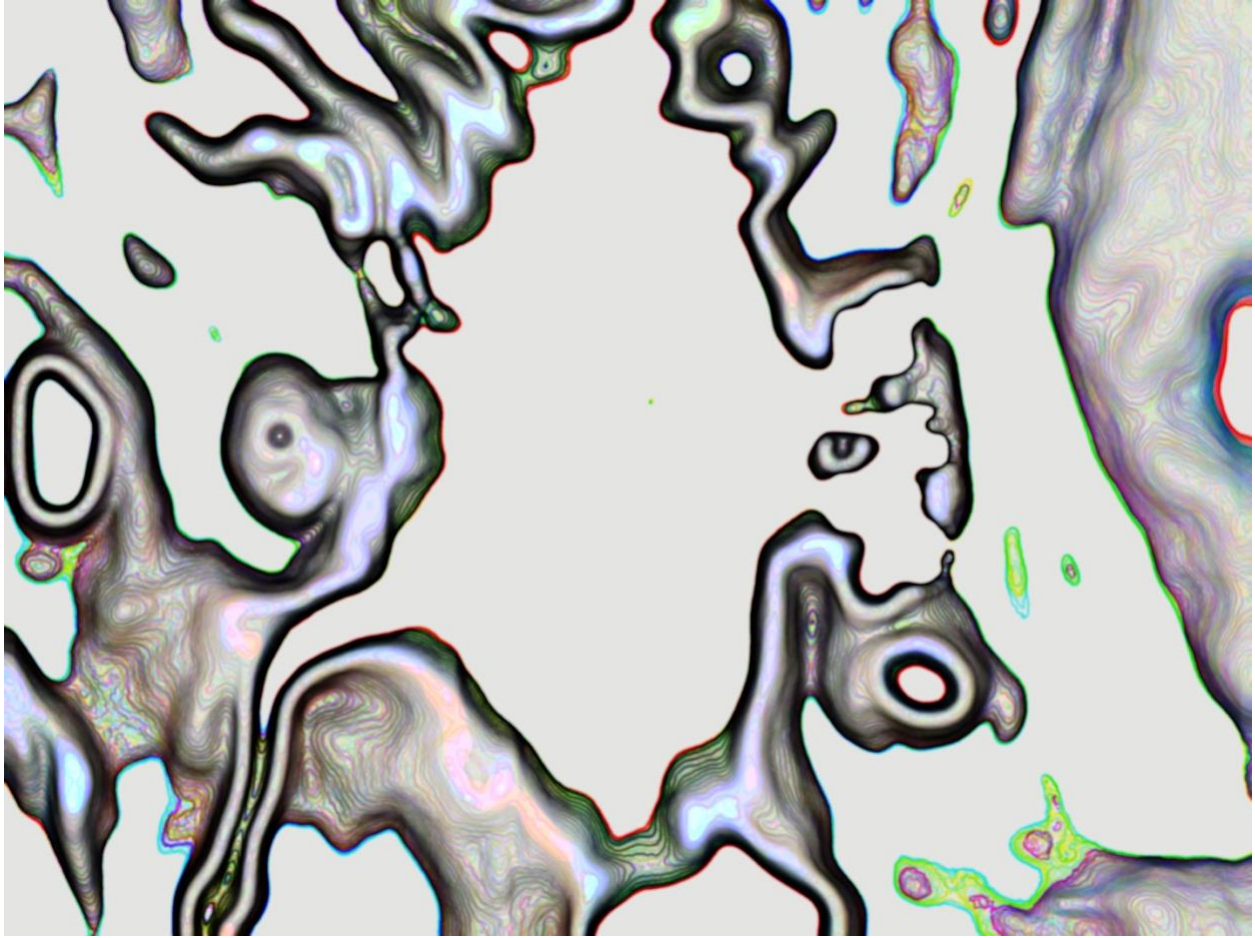
“Take this piece of shit to the car now,” he demanded of my brother. Jamal took the same arm and started pulling me toward that direction. I heard my dad talk to my aunt and say, “Aisha, please keep this between us.” I looked back and all she did was nod and say, “I understand. My lips are sealed.” I shifted my vision around and saw Noor. I escaped my brother’s grip and shoved him down the three steps.

“Noor,” I yelled. “Don’t marry him. He’s gay and he’ll ruin your life too.”

“Shut up,” my dad snapped back. “Don’t ruin the reputation of a good imam. It’s a sin.”

My vision was blurred with tears, but I saw him move toward me, and it felt like a brick wall hit me across the face twice before I hit the floor. He started kicking me in the stomach repeatedly. Jamal came into my vision and tried to stop him but that didn’t work. I tried to move but the kicks kept on coming until they stopped me from feeling all together.

The last thing I heard was someone walking in and saying, “*Eid Mubarak.*”



Fears Unspoken
—Amy Tolbert

THE TROUGH

by Jesse Leroy Mardian

He left her while she slept in the early morning darkness, and as he quietly crept out the door, he glanced over his shoulder with hesitation. Her delicate hand rested over her round belly that, protruding slightly above the sheets, looked like a ripe cantaloupe nestled on top a nimbus cloud. For a moment, Joshua stood there taken by the image, but soon the fear rose again in his young soul and his decision was made.

Carefully, he escaped out the apartment, shutting each door as he passed. He had already packed his car with what he could: a bag of clothes, guitar, surfboard, wetsuit, and a box of junk containing old photos, documents, and books. And looking through the car window, he checked over all these items, scattered in the trunk of his jeep. Joshua exhaled completely before the engine blared, and then he was on the road.

Driving along the Pacific Northwest Coast, Joshua weaved through winding roads surrounded by vast deciduous and coniferous trees. Western Redcedars, Douglas-firs, Western Hemlocks, and Sitka Spruces flourished along the highway. The white of his eyes were red from a sleepless night, and his throat was a drought. He stared straight ahead with an unknown aim. Where he would go he hardly knew. But he drove on; fear being his pilot.

In the eerie gloom of dawn Joshua felt miserable, cowardly, and even childish. At many forks of the road he contemplated turning back, but he kept his foot on the pedal and his hands deathly gripped onto steering wheel. His

stomach ached with the thought that this day could define the rest of his life; this one decision could make him the man he would always be. And as the all the trees hovered over him, looming as he sped past, Joshua suddenly swerved and stopped the car on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

Exiting the car, Joshua welcomed the crisp air with a shiver. He strolled to the edge of the bluff with his hands deep in his coat pockets and watched. The waves were hardly visible, but he could tell that the swell was strong, worthy of an early morning paddle out. The chilly air was nice, he thought. It numbed his brooding. He studied the waves for a moment longer, and then, without indecision, retrieved his board and his wetsuit before heading down the dirt trail to the beach.

He reached the sand, and while changing into his wetsuit, the morning coldness trembling his bare skin, Joshua looked out toward the waves and saw a lone figure perched outside the break. At first he thought it to be a protruding reef he had forgotten about, but as he looked closer, he knew it was the figure of a man. It wasn't uncommon for there to be someone else out in the water at that hour, but Joshua felt strange as watched the motionless man.

Still watching the figure, Joshua slipped on his booties, his gloves, and zipped up. After a few quick stretches, he jumped into the icy water and paddled. With the first rays of the morning sun on his back, Joshua felt the best he had since he left. Maybe he had made the right choice, he thought, maybe. As the first wave approached him, he pressed down on his board, duck-diving underneath, and felt his brain freeze as he resurfaced. Moving fast, diving under more and more waves, Joshua finally made it out past the wave

break.

There, outside, waiting, an old man sat on an enormous longboard. Astonishingly, he wore neither wetsuit nor gloves, just tattered trunks that hung above the knee. Joshua noticed this and he looked harder at the man and saw the rough features of his back. As though he had lived in the sun forever, the old man's back was scarred and cratered; the skin was raw and freckled. From the top of his bald head to his lower back, the old man's body seemed overused.

Joshua perched on top his board behind the old man and waited to be acknowledged, but the man just stared off without a word. Finally, as no waves came, Joshua made himself known.

"Little chilly, yeah?"

"I'm used to it," the old man said in a deep smoker's voice, his back still turned.

Joshua sat for a moment, thinking of something clever to say.

"You must have thick skin," Joshua said.

The old man didn't respond, rather he sat on his giant log with his arms folded, staring out in the horizon. Joshua sat behind the man a few meters; he couldn't see his face. He examined the old man again: his wrinkled back, his bald head, and the sun splotches on his skin that clung like barnacles. An awkward silence ensued, so Joshua breathed loud and rubbed his rubber gloves together as though it could warm them up.

The ocean was like glass: no waves rolled through, and the morning breeze died as the sun slowly crept up behind them. The two sat waiting, the

young man and the old man, searching the horizon for the slightest bump. But nothing came; the waves that Joshua had seen from the bluff now seemed fictional. Some seagulls flew by squawking, some pelicans swooped into the ocean to gobble up fish, but the waves had disappeared. Soon, the cold no longer numbed his thoughts, and Joshua began to think about the morning: why he left, what he was doing, and why things turned out this way. He was in deep brooding when the old man spoke again.

“The lull is the worst,” he said, “You either call it quits and paddle in, or you wait it out in the hope of something great coming along. You never know but a set that just goes on forever with perfect rights curving along the point all the way to the beach could be all yours if you wait. If you put yourself through the hard part. But it’s easier to go in, get warm, be comfortable, rationalize that you made the right choice.”

Joshua listened selectively as the old man rambled on.

“That’s surfing though: patience. Sometimes you don’t get what you want—you go through a month of shit waves, freezing your ass off for ankle high wakes. But then, then, a day comes along where the waves seem to come for you, every wave, as though they were meant for you, and you only, and that’s what keeps you coming back.”

Right then the old man turned and looked at Joshua for the first time. His face was worn by age and experience; he had deep pockets under his eyes and stubble like sandpaper. And those eyes, Joshua saw, were the color of steel. And as the old man turned to look at the horizon once again, he smiled wide; his gums were blood red and his teeth angel white.

There was something about the old man's face that seemed oddly familiar, comforting to Joshua. It was though he had seen his face before in a dream that one remembers, yet forgets as well. Joshua pondered deeply searching through memories that led all the way back to his childhood. One memory flickered like a spark. Though he couldn't recall whether it was real or a distant dream, he remembered it all the same.

He was a young boy playing on the shoreline, picking up sand dollars and breaking them in his palm. His mother had told him to stay away from the water. All of a sudden he felt a strong pull underneath him, as though something underground was clutching him, claiming him, taking him down. He had been caught in a undertow, and as he struggled and struggled on the verge of drowning, something finally pulled him up. Just when everything was becoming completely black, a golden light emerged and he was on the beach again, coughing up water. When his eyes opened he was staring up at an old man's face. And it was that same face that Joshua had just seen again.

The old man sat before him, waiting for the waves to come. Joshua stared at the back of his head and then finally spoke.

"I feel that I have met you before somewhere, Mr—"

And as though he had willed them to come, the horizon rose and the swell pulsed again. And still lingering on the old man's words, Joshua politely waited for him to turn and catch the first wave. He wanted to see his face again. However, the leathery man just sat, bobbing up and down as the waves passed under him. His patience finally wore thin; he turned and caught the next wave that came. It was a fine wave; Joshua rode it calmly with slow, long

turns as the offshore wind brushed through him. At every section of wave, when it would seem to be concluding, he sped through, top to bottom, and the wave continued on. He cut the lip of the wave with a sharp turn, and a spray was lifted of into the air. Finally, the wave became smaller and smaller; he rode it completely.

The remarkable thing about surfing is that your mind can be occupied by the weighing troubles of life; but as soon as you catch a wave, your mind turns off, and though it's only for a brief period, your mind is at ease, and you experience a piece of bliss. As the wave ended, Joshua felt this joy and relished it as he sat on top his board. Yet after a few breaths, his smile faded and his mind came back to earth. Fear overcame him again. The sun still rising behind him, he longed to speak with the old man just one more time, so he laid on his board and strongly paddled. Like digging deep holes into the water, Joshua paddled toward the old man who he could see far out in the lineup.

But the waves kept pushing through, and hard. Every wave broke with thunder, and avalanches of white wash surged in like a stampede. As each tumbling force raced by him, Joshua pressed his board deep under the water and duck-dove. When he resurfaced, after each wave, his brain felt like mush, and he screamed out in frustration. More and more waves formed, crashed, and pushed Joshua back. His arms became heavy rubber as he tried to paddle harder, but to no avail. Yet, Joshua kept fighting the waves, diving under them, and resurfacing in exasperation.

He could no longer see the old man; he could no longer see the sun, the sky, the birds, the beach; all Joshua saw were the mountains of white water

rushing before him. The surge of the waves became insurmountable, and Joshua began to lose his breath. As much as he wanted to keep fighting, to press through, his body gave up, and finally he turned around and let a large white, crumbling wave swallow him up.

Though he held on tight, the force of the wave was stronger, prying him off the board and toppling him in fury. It all happened so fast for Joshua. As he was cast off his board, the wave submerged him deep, and he felt as though he was shoved in a washing machine. His body was contorted, and as he flipped in circles under the water, he couldn't tell what was down and what was up. The weight of the wave held him strongly, and soon he began to panic. Fighting for air, the fear of drowning overcame him, and his hands reached and clutched for anything, but only water surrounded him. Still struggling, Joshua opened his eyes, and the freezing water stung like knives; but as he twirled, he saw the golden light and knew the surface was near. With his last ounce of air, he kicked and waded with all the strength he had. When he broke through the surface, the water shattered like crystal.

His leash had broken, and when Joshua finally made it back to the beach, his board was lying on the sand. Crawling up the beach, Joshua looked over his shoulder to see if the old man had caught a wave, but he was nowhere to be seen. Exhausted, Joshua laid on his back and breathed, he was starving for air. The sun had fully breached, and it was becoming a beautiful day. The waves were dying now and they crashed quietly. Some sparse clouds lingered along the baby blue sky, and like a visual lullaby, Joshua watched them until his eyes shut.

He awoke with a shiver, bewildered. He stood up, peering out into the ocean. There were no waves now, and the old man was gone. Joshua was alone on the cold beach with nothing but sand, seaweed, and wind embracing him. He thought long about everything the morning had given him, and he felt grateful as he stood up and walked away, leaving his shame on the shoreline.

When Joshua returned to his car, he changed his into his clothes and sat for a moment behind the wheel. He stared long at himself in the rearview mirror. A wrinkle here, a freckle there, some scars where old zits had been—he was getting older. Behind him, his few belongings were thrown about, a mess. He ignited the engine, went reverse, and then headed along the winding road where the deciduous and coniferous trees welcomed him back. She would never know he was ever gone.

WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN

I did not know how to whisper. My mouth was so big
my heart could fit beneath my tongue, my voice so loud

it boiled over, reddening cheeks and shattering plaster.
Each night I prayed with my whole mouth. Slid prayers

between aubergine pillows and blankets made of psalms.
I prayed that my heart would shrink; my words turn soft

and purple so that I might learn to whisper. Once a boy
tried to put his fingers in my mouth. Pressed meaty pads

of index, middle, and thumb against pink chin and lips,
a cocked rifle, slipped past my teeth, aimed at my heart.

I lived when my mouth-heart wailed and he ran from me.
That night I dreamt quiet sounds: a stretch of red muscle,

pencils on paper, a bear cub's first breath. The next morning
two boys carried loaded guns into their Colorado school,

asking *do you believe in god?* They aimed the barrel's end
at those who nodded. Back then, if they had pointed the gun

at me, the big heart in my mouth would have roared a loud
prayer; and me, not able to whisper, the crosshairs at my lips.

—Laura E. Davis

intra

The doctor's erected a pyramid
inside my uterus, a crucifix

I sport a tangle of copper
atop my cervix, tiny bracelets

wound around the stoic
sentry stationed in my womb

He is a soldier, a boned
scarecrow. My children kneel

for his sword, he unravels helixes,
splinters the blueprints for brows,

hazel, height, lashes, coarse,
freckles, arithmetic, he doesn't blink

Just strangles sleeping embryos. Dices
nucleotides to ribbons, confetti decorating

the fallopian halls where generations would hang
and sleep and tussle through fluid, daughters

never to grow hair enough for plaits,
or lungs, or flesh enough for tumors,

sons never to be fleshed at all
The doctor's propped a rifle

against the red wall, bullets
shatter meiotic membranes, painters and pianists

die in the crossfire. How many presidents
have curdled in my menses since?

How many rapists and athletes
and architects? How many

astronomers have averted abortion,
their births so strictly
controlled

—Kristiana Colón



Gotta Get Out of This Washing Machine Before I Grow Up!
—Charles Hayes

BIG DEAL

Cancer took my uterus. Big deal. Never wanted kids. Barely knew it was there. Saves me the cost of birth control. About \$240 a year. That's a big deal when you're a teacher. I'm supposed to lament it, aren't I? I'm supposed to write something called "Ode to my Uterus," join a support group, experience loss of self. Well, I always loved jack-o'-lanterns. Now I'm carved like a pumpkin. Pulp disposed. Wearing a smile that could be sincere, that could be sinister. Not sure which.

—Claire Kinnane

a daughter

I think I smothered your child
in my quiet churn, muzzled
her tiny African mandible in the mucous
of my undone motherhood. I braided

the black cables of her hair into bone
marrow, burned her fingernails to crust,
crushed the song of ashen atoms twisting
in the thimble of her throat. I wanted

you to save her, to hear her when
you mined me. I was only silence
for you to plumb, air too thin
to womb for your songs. When you stab

a brittle matchbox with a staff
of dynamite, something is sure to burn.

—Kristiana Colón

CHANGELING FAIRYTALE

But men are men; the best sometimes forget.

—Shakespeare

When I'm half-asleep, my face turned
from her in that best friend, sleepover code
I wonder what it would be if I were a boy,
the type she could see, her fingers
tossed into my hair, her lips parted in a smile,
my half-crooked smirk.

I'd be the man women dream of—
the one that courts with roses,
sends you notes, sweeps you to
a fairytale place, one that could carry you
over a threshold but never would.
I would iron my shirts, starched
cuffs pushed past my forearms, pencil
smeared on my hand, ink by my lips,
hair cut like Updike's.

But that won't be—even if I
grow a mustache, hair on a flattened
chest, I'd still be pressed as that chick,
that *girl* your body won't trust, won't
feel as true, won't let lie.

—Rigby Bendele

THE HANDS OF MARY WORTH

Once when my son was breaking apart,
my wife held him briefly
and took his face into her hands
and smoothed it to its youthful faith.

Of all the absurd things
we ask women to do, soothing
is perhaps the most amazing,
drawing us toward them; assuring
us that death is an illusion, that we belong
in the world, in their comforting hands.

The master artists
best capture that touch.

But if you are away from the galleries,
look at the daily comic pages
and see worthy Mary express, console
countless neighbors,
palm on breast, fingers
on throat, care radiating
out of the beautiful hands,
carrying the most overlooked gospel
of all the news.

—Jay Carson

BANGS

by Bleuzette La Feir

You gasp as I desperately push your blood-matted bangs from your forehead. The gurgling sound from within you is subsiding. I feel a rush of panic since I do not know if this is a good thing or a bad thing. Are you lying here drowning in my arms? Or has the thick liquid passed through you? Hopefully, it will all come out the other end. I don't mind; really, please feel free to shit your blood all over me. I want it...if it will keep you alive.

Seems a century, but moments ago, the shrapnel came through only your space in the vehicle. Its jagged, evil bits and bobs, make-shift blades, and well-honed knives made of rusty nails and curled bits of leftovers from splintered cars, melted-down guns, and empty fire extinguishers. Why is *why* the only word I can think of? Why you? Why not me, why not Pied Piper, or Snake Bite, or Mac?

The air is white, your face is fading. My head knows it's happening, but I cannot feel the heat slipping from your body.

The gurgling is back and it's all I can hear. That and the shifty metal carabineer that holds our flag secure to the pole on the Humvee. It bangs with fervor in the blistering high desert wind. We wait together forever. A skinny buzzard makes fleeting shade on our heads as it flies over, closely eyeing the deep red that signals death.

Some of these assholes say women should not be in battle. Well, this time they get their wish. There is one less.



Scissor Life
—Jacob Oet

SHE #20

She is my heroin(e)—
I want to dice her voice into slender splinters
with a Japanese sushi knife so
I could inhale it like the sunshine;
I have no intention of reifying this
inexplicable pulsation of my veins,
but I must reign in the scattered
cornucopia rapidly brimming over
lest the waterfall surge directly into
her Amadeus fingertips.

—E.J. Loera

FELINE BONDS

I stare, amazed, at the gray
cat that you're holding. You've adopted
my allergies and my fears, you now hold things
in your arms. The cat must be named after some Odyssean
goddess or asexual crone, and you hold her
like a football, like you do not know how to hold
a poly-estrous creature nor whether you're holding
a Gib or a Spay, as you smile the horrific
smile of a ventriloquist's dummy or the lopsided
unhappy smile of a burn victim. Your demented
newfound bond with cats suits your story of being
trapped in the body of Edward
Scissorhands very well; you've found yourself a pair
of heavy gloves to wear when you decide to show
public affection for your independent feline.
I hope when the two of you are alone
or bedside that you do not get too cozy so as to take off
a glove for the sake of bonding.
Though you wouldn't feel a thing, a bloody knife
for a hand and a dead domesticated
thing that only asked to eat and be warmed
against your back just might drive you to the thing
you fear most of all—the unafraid night
eyes and sandpaper tongue of a feral housemate.

—Jessica Mason McFadden

LOVE POEM #3

I want to lie beneath you as he fucks you
From behind. I like the idea of your breasts
above me, nipple rings glinting in the light I'd insist
was left on. I want to see your face when you come
and lean up to lick into your mouth
even though you don't like too much tongue
and can never have too much of teeth.

When he's done, I'll fuck you with my fingers
Long acrylic nails skittering up slick walls
My tongue tasting you and him
because I can never own you completely enough.

—Ashley Dean

DEFLOWERED

I laid myself out to
you, for your gentle

hands like a budding flower, but
you pluck the pistil,

and as if seized by violent storm:

I unravel,
falling into a shower of black blossoms.

—Patricia Kim



Garden
—Kate LaDew

WHAT I WANT TO GIVE YOU

What I want to give you—it's nothing.
You find it under trees—it seems
to fall in with the torn-down leaves
and golden needles. Sometimes
you'll see it between the stones
and broken shells on sand. Even
on the street—two crows
tugging at one brown bag, neither
getting it. What I want
to give you—what I haven't got—
it's here, it's in the air, it's out
at night. The stars nest in it.
If I touch you, empty-handed,
there, it's yours, but you can't keep it.
All the world's shadow-casting
things are its crinkly wrapper.

—Jed Myers

MESSAGE FOR LEA

by C. Rochelle Weidner

Lea liked to walk when the tide was out, her small feet compressing into the wet sand, warm waves lapping over her toes. She would watch the small crabs scuttle for their homes. It was on one of these walks that she got the idea for the spell, a magic. Grandmother would not talk of such things. They were taboo.

But she so desperately wanted to see them again, even for a short while, just to tell them she loved them and missed them. Her father, Paulo, vanished on a fishing trip when she was two, and she had no memory. They never found his boat. A small black-and-white photograph was her only reminder. Her mother died a few months later in a tragic accident when she was driving down the mountain. Sometimes in her dreams she could smell her mother's perfume and feel a warm embrace on her cheek.

Grandmother and Grandfather took her in, and when she was school age, the family agreed it would be best for her to go to school on Oahu and live with her Auntie Tia.

But she missed her parents, missed them terribly, and the idea came to her that she could call them back. Part of her knew it was *kapu*, forbidden, but she rationalized that her intentions were only for the best. She wanted to see them, hold them in her memory, not just from a photograph. No matter how brief the moment, it would be worth it.

At the end of Tia's street, in an old house, lived a woman who certainly

knew magic. Her silvery hair hung straight down her back almost to her knees. Lea was afraid but fascinated. She knew her name was Napua. Auntie Tia had warned her to stay away, as she had made the circular finger motion to indicate Napua might be crazy.

She told her friend Mimi about her belief, and Mimi laughed at her.

“You are crazy, girl. You listen to your old grandmother too much.”

Mimi wasn't like her; her parents were very modern, and, despite having lived in the islands all her life, Mimi wanted to leave. She wanted to go back to the mainland, to California, where her parents came from, where people “really knew how to live,” as she put it. Mimi was plugged in, literally, most of the time to her iPod, and put little energy into enjoying where she lived.

Lea didn't like being laughed at, and she resented Mimi making fun of her. But Lea had nodded and spoken no more of her beliefs. The spirits were all around her. She knew it. Grandmother knew it too. The two girls had grown up next door to each other, and Lea had always been invited to Mimi's parties, events, and sometimes even to family vacations. Mimi's parents owned a posh store in Honolulu, where they sold expensive jewelry, artwork, and popular sculptures to the tourists.

Mimi, in turn, had joined Lea at *'ohana* events, luaus, weddings, and weekends at the Big Island when she would go to visit her grandmother. The attractions at the Big Island were, for Mimi, the horses, the new boys, and the chance to get away from her parents.

“She's a wild one, isn't she,” Grandmother would whisper in Lea's ear as they watched Mimi flirt with one of the young cowboys.

“I know. But she’s a good friend, even if we don’t always think the same.”

Grandmother nodded. “She doesn’t believe, does she?”

Lea sighed. “No, she doesn’t. She doesn’t see them or notice anything.”

For many generations the residents of her grandmother’s ranch had known of the presence of the Menehune. Some would call them brownies or elves; some called them ugly, squat creatures and were afraid of them. One morning Grandmother said she came outside, and there was a complete wall, about two feet high, surrounding her small garden. She was very surprised and realized that she had been thinking about it for some time. Her vegetables were being raided, and she thought a wall might help. Perhaps she even spoke aloud. “Oh, my tomatoes are gone again. Should I put up a wall?”

Even if she didn’t speak aloud, someone heard her. Lea knew the story of the magical wall. The Menehune liked building things. It was rumored that they wouldn’t start anything they couldn’t build in a single night.

Grandmother had left fresh fruit on the wall every night for a week to repay them for their efforts. It was always gone the next morning.

The Menehune had also built a fishpond on the beach. Grandmother’s house faced the ocean, and when Lea’s grandfather was alive, he would take his pole and walk out in the early mornings, casting his line out into the surf. His breakfast waited him upon his return, and later that day Grandmother would wrap the catch in ti leaves and bake the fish slowly with herbs from her garden. Lea could not recall anything ever tasting so good.

One morning there was a fishpond near where Grandfather fished. It was small and oval in shape. So he fished for extra fish that day and released them

into the pond. It was a wonderful way to give them extra food. He always made sure there was plenty for the Menehune as well.

Lea begged to see them. But Grandfather was doubtful. "No one sees; they are very shy, you know." Lea begged. So one night they camped out by the beach. Grandfather lashed a couple of hammocks to the trees, and they lay and watched together. Dark comes quickly in the islands. There was no moon that night, only the thousands of glittering stars in the heavens. As the night sky slipped by, Lea tried to keep her eyes from the shifting figures in the constellations and peered into the darkness, just to glimpse one of the Menehune.

Once she thought she saw one. But it turned out to be a pig, and her eyes grew heavy, and she slept under the stars. Her grandmother had walked down from the house, and she watched as her beloved granddaughter slept. Grandfather joined her, and they stood arm in arm.

"She's so beautiful," Grandmother whispered. "She reminds me so much of Paulo."

Paulo was their son. After he died, and then her mother, the families met to decide how to raise Lea and made the arrangements that she would live with her Auntie Tia on Oahu. The schools would be better, and she would get a better chance than she would in the remote village near her grandmother's ranch.

But summers were spent on the island of her birth, where, in her grandmother's garden, Lea learned all the stories of her ancient ancestors.

In August she would return to Oahu, to her auntie's apartment near

Honolulu. Tia was wonderful to live with. Like Mimi's parents, Tia was trendy and very attuned to the local scene. She told Lea that the myths were best left unsaid. "People will think you are loopy. Loopy Lea they'll call you. You need to pay attention to algebra and your other lessons."

Lea would listen to her friend. She tried to fit in, to be interested in the music that Mimi liked, and the clothes she wanted to buy. But Lea yearned to be back on her island as she began to think about the possibilities. Even her grandmother did not know what she was doing.

Telling her auntie that she was walking to the store, Lea screwed up her courage and knocked on the old woman's door. The porch was strange and shadowy, and it seemed a very long time before she heard footsteps.

"Yes, child?"

"Excuse me, but I wanted to ask you a question. I am Lea Akani."

"I know who you are. You are Tia's niece, daughter of Paulo and Momi. I've watched you grow up. You look very like your mother."

"You knew my mother?" Lea's fright had vanished.

"Yes. She was very beautiful. And kind."

"I don't remember her very well. I have photographs. But I miss her."

"Why don't you come in?"

Lea glanced back at the sidewalk.

"Don't worry. It's been a very long time since I've kidnapped any young women."

"I'm sorry. It was rude of me to act like a scared child. I wanted to ask you..." It was then that words failed her. How could she possibly ask such a

thing? Her face flushed crimson.

Napua smiled. "What possible magic could you want of me?"

Lea's eyes widened. How did she know? "I want to see my parents. I've only pictures and nothing in my mind. It makes me sad and lonely."

"Magic is a very powerful thing. You need mana, you need power for magic. Do you have mana? Do you have anything sacred? Have you thought about what you are asking? Perhaps their spirits are at rest. Would you want to disturb them?"

Lea bowed her head. "No, I don't want to disturb them. I want them to be at peace. But I would like peace as well. And surely they would want their daughter to feel that. Is it so much to ask?"

Napua put her arm on Lea's shoulder. "Perhaps not. Let me think about your request. Go home, talk to your aunt. Tell her hello for me. And come back tomorrow and we'll talk again."

That night at dinner, Tia looked at her sharply. "You are very quiet tonight. Is there trouble?"

Lea swallowed the bite of rice that stuck in her throat. "I went to see Napua today. I wanted to ask her if she would help me see my parents. She said to tell you hello."

"Why?" Tia asked simply.

"Because I can't see them in my mind. I miss them. I know you love me, and Grandmother and Grandfather love me. But I am sad because I have no memory."

"What did Napua tell you?"

“She told me to come back tomorrow.”

“We’ll go together.” Tia stood and began clearing the table. The subject was closed.

Later that night, after Lea was supposed to be sleeping, she heard Tia’s voice in the night air. She was walking in her garden, talking on her cell phone. The call went on for a long time, and, as she drifted to sleep, Lea felt the brush of warm air that sometimes caressed her shoulders, and the sweet scent of pua, the flower blossom, filled the room.

Napua’s long hair was wound up on top her head. She was wearing a beautiful muumuu. The cloth was a deep teal with white hibiscus. She smiled at the two of them and opened her door wide. “Come in. It is nice to see you again, Tia.”

“And you, Napua. Did you talk to Alice?”

Alice was Lea’s grandmother’s name, her English name, and Lea was a little surprised that Tia used it.

“I did. And we’ve all agreed.”

She turned to look at Lea. “We’ve decided your request is an honorable one, an act of mercy. *Ho’ounauna* is sometimes what it is called, when you want to call someone back. The intentions are pure and not harmful. But you have to understand, Lea, that you cannot cling. It will only be for moments. And to make sure you are honoring them, you will have to make offerings to make sure their return is safe.”

Lea couldn’t believe that they were listening to her. That they were actually going to help her. A thought broke into her mind that she wanted to

tell Mimi, her friend, but almost at the same time, she knew that she could never tell. This would have to be her secret alone.

“I’ll do whatever you ask. When, when are we going to do this?”

“Tonight. The tides are auspicious. I know a spot that will work well. Your aunt will drive us, and I will give you your magic.”

The sun was settling into the west as they arrived at the beach. Their small entourage walked down to a simple stretch of beach. Lea could see nothing unusual. There were no unusual rocks, no altars, nothing that would call out this place from any other. Napua knelt and took a small bundle from her scarf. She stood and cast flowers into the sea and closed her eyes. The song from her lips could barely be heard. The water lapped around another bundle at her feet. They stood and waited. Lea realized they were they only ones there. Up and down, all other people had vanished. Nothing happened. No ghosts came from the depths. No sign that their plea had been heard. Lea was faintly disappointed. She wasn’t sure what she expected to see, but she had thought that surely something would occur.

“We are done, *pau*,” Napua announced.

The women were silent on the drive back. Lea was trying to keep the tears from forming in her eyes. Once she saw her aunt glance back at her.

“Don’t worry, Lea. Spirits are not on our time.”

At Tia’s house the phone rang while they were preparing their dinner. It was Lea’s grandmother. “Grandmother, I miss you.”

“And I miss you. We are thinking of you a lot.” Grandmother paused. “We will be having a party soon, a luau for your cousin. She has gotten herself

engaged. I'll talk to you soon about the details."

The conversation was brief. Grandmother didn't like long phone conversations; she was suspicious of her phone's electrical current.

There was laughter in the garden. Lea opened her eyes. The clock at the bedside flipped over to two. Again the light peal of laughter, a woman's, reached her ears. Cautiously, she slid open the door and stepped onto the small lanai. There were stone benches and a small fishpond, and on the bench sat a young woman. Her long hair was loose, and she was looking up at a handsome young man. He plucked at the strings of a ukulele and murmured soft words. Then he bent over and kissed her. "I love you, Momi."

Lea stood very still. She didn't want the moment to vanish, but the next thing she knew, Tia was calling her. "Wake up, lazybones, you'll be late for school."

Tia stopped. "Lea, you are crying. Are you sick, honey?"

"I saw them, Tia. I saw them. Last night in the garden. They seemed so real, so in love."

Tia embraced her niece and said a silent thank-you. "We'll go back tonight, throw flowers into the sea."

"Yes, I would like that." Lea knew their spirits resided near, for as she closed her eyes she could hear the song in her heart and see them in her mind. They would always be there. Loving her.

CAFFÈ LATTE

I'd like to believe our sweetest moments
elude disintegration—laced
with the night's milky streaks in undetected repetitions,
though it must happen in a realm
beyond sense if what I know
holds sway in the fore and aft—

or that a window to all this opens between arousal
and slumber, like our touching
in a way that never occurred and before we had forgotten.
Naturally I don't accept this either.
In bed, I ask how anything holds
against all that resists my grasp.

Then it's daybreak. You've come downstairs
and I've already primed the espresso maker,
ascertained the good gold of the *crema* in your cup,
a warmth in mine. Our table by the window—
me lost in my paper, you reading to me from yours—
an apricot light spilling on what we know.

—Michael Sandler



The Past, Rewritten by Memory
—Amy Tolbert

THOSE CHANDELIER EARRINGS

by Dwight Hilson

You'll just love it here; love it. Everyone's so nice and friendly, and the nurses—oh, silly me, I mean caregivers, that's what they want us to call them—well, they can handle most anything. And they're *much* gentler than over at Springdale. Everything's just so wonderful, almost no reason to leave—not that they'd let us! Hew; I do like to joke sometimes. See what a fuss they're making over you; I do believe they want to make me jealous. Don't mind me, I'm just joshing.

I hear they put in the Westover Wing. Did you know they're all named after the towns to which they point—like a compass? You can't see those towns from here, which made me kinda confused, at first. I'm in the Fairfield Wing, but yours is the best. Everyone calls it the "Happy Wing" since the renovation. Those old rooms were simply dreadful: so small and dark, and the heat never could catch up with winter. When Hazel Welter caught the pneumonia, they just had to do something. But it's nice now, and can you believe that golden-paisley wallpaper? Never seen such color in my whole life and that carpet, sort of cushiony, like you're riding in a Cadillac.

I always liked them the best, Cadillacs, that is; always bought a white one—the dealer called it Pearl White—with chrome wheels. Herb wouldn't ride in it; said it was my "girlie" car, God bless him. Hard to believe it's been over twenty years since he passed. Happened the night that Boston player let New York win the World Series—still don't know how that ball got through his legs, not that I care so much about baseball; that's what Herb was watching before bed, so I remember. Now did I go off and change the subject? Herb used to say I liked the sound of my own voice just a touch too much; but he liked it too, I'm sure. He'd get home from the company and say, "Tell me something, honey." And you can bet I did.

But I better keep my voice down; it looks like Shirley's taking a nap. Let's see how long before she stirs—oh, there you go, not long indeed, must've been the lunch smell. Don't you dare ask her how she's doing or she'll complain like a barnyard hen; but if you ask me, there's nothing wrong with ol' Shirley's sense of smell. A fresh pie would wake her from a coma. My, my, did I say that? Don't worry; I'm sure she didn't hear.

Now just look at that pot roast; didn't I tell you, you'd love the food. My little Coco just adores the pot roast. Sometimes she's a fussy little poodle but not when I bring back pot roast. She has to stay in my room, bless her tiny heart. She doesn't have much hair left, but she's still my little baby. Don't know what I'd do without her. Just a puppy when I moved here, and every day, no matter what, she climbs on my lap, puts her head down, and falls asleep, her warm little breath puffing against my arm. Don't think I'd get another, wouldn't want to abandon a puppy, if you know what I mean. I'm sorry, that's not one of my best jokes; but it's against the rules anyways: Only pets allowed are the ones you come in with. Do you have a pet? Oh, of course not, no pets in

the Happy Wing. We're in the Fairfield Wing.

Did I say that already? Sometimes I lose track when I'm excited. Don't tell Shirley but I think we're in luck today—they might serve cake. I just love their cake. I had cake on my birthday; it was so beautiful, it had a single pink spiral candle, you know, the kind with white wax along the spiral ridges, never noticed that before. Anyway, they let me blow out the flame all by myself, but I needed help to pull it out so I wouldn't lose any frosting. That's the best part, the frosting—so sweet and with that ever-so-slight crust that melts on your tongue like cotton candy. I could've eaten the whole cake, or at least another piece, but I didn't want to be greedy. Oh, they would've brought another if I asked; everyone is so nice and friendly. Did I tell you they'll take you shopping if you want? There's a special van, with a lift, up you go, easy as pie. Of course, I never ask—I used to drive myself. I was always a good driver. Fast too. That's why my Herb wouldn't drive with me.

Now I know what you're thinking: He didn't want to be seen in a girlie car, but, no, it was speed—I liked to get where I was going. Herb was content enough to putter along at the speed limit—can you imagine that? The speed limit. So we mostly took two cars, and I'd be ready to order a second martini by the time he showed up. Always loved to drive and I was fast too. I said that, didn't I? Well, I started young; my pappy taught me not too far from here. A Ford Model T. Pappy sure loved that car—first in our family. He was a machinist, you know, could fix most any part all by himself. I was twelve when he told me to climb in—it looked as high as a second-story window. You didn't need any permit or license back in '27. I expected a nice ride but no sir; he sat me right there on the driver's side. Couldn't see over the wheel, and my feet were too short so he got pillows and lashed blocks to my shoes. Can you imagine? Never so scared in my life. Stalled her a couple times and could barely turn that wheel, but Pappy said I was a natural. I've never forgotten how he looked me clear in the eyes, saying, "Don't ever let someone say you can't do something, Olive—you can drive."

You should've seen the looks on all my friends' faces when Pappy let me ramble that Ford down Main Street—and I was only twelve. He said I was a natural.

By the way, do you remember that old news store past downtown, off High Street? The one just three blocks from the high school? Last time I was by there, saw a new sign saying, "The House of Love." Thank God my Herb didn't live to see that one. You'd think it was a cathouse, but Herb would've thought a Baptist church was even worse. He was Episcopalian himself but held no great affection for the pious—thought them a bunch of phonies, mostly.

Haven't been by there for a spell. Used to pass that way on my drives to Greenwood Cemetery, but those streets got all dug up and the detour took you along 4th Street. Never liked going over there; lost my little Ruthie near that intersection. Can you believe it was a drunk driver? Middle of the day too. Pappy and Mother picked her up at high school in the coupe and never saw the son of a bitch who hit them. Oh, I'm sorry for my language, but I get so mad. We were very close and I didn't get to the hospital in time to hold her hand. You just never lose the bitterness for some things.

I'm sorry—did I tell you about my Herb yet? Yes, let's talk about Herb; he was the cat's meow, if I do say so. We met in 1940 at the paper company. That's right, National Paper. I worked as a secretary in the executive offices. Herb was one of the big shots; his grandfather started National. And let me tell you, he was tall, lithe, and had a smile that could ruin a nun. He flirted with me something awful—told me my curves could stop a freight train—but I kept my distance, yes I did. He was more than a decade older and married with two teenage girls, but I guess you could say he plain wore me down. One day he took me to lunch and said, "I'm divorcing Millie and I want you to marry me."

Of course I didn't say yes, not right away at least—but I knew I would eventually. Herb was a man who just wouldn't take no for an answer, you could push or pull, but sooner or later, you had to get out of the way. He was something.

Wouldn't be any children for me though—I knew that was part of the deal. He wanted me all to himself. It sure was awkward at the office for a while; I don't think Herb could concentrate too well. Mr. William Logan, he was the president in those days, finally took me aside, and said, "Olive, if you don't marry Herb soon, we're going to have to fire him—and it's *his* company." Now I'm sure he was kidding, but I quit right then; just walked straight out the door, and do you know what? Herb was waiting outside in a brand-new Cadillac, pale blue with whitewall tires, a Sixty Special. He leaned against the hood and opened the driver's door; I can still see that wide smile, and all he said was, "Get in." Must've been 100 white roses all lined up in the backseat, what a smell—if that car was black, folks would've thought it a hearse; we rode with the windows down; I was speechless. Everything was a blur, and when we stopped, Herb reached over and touched my ears, his fingers were warm as a lightbulb, and I closed my eyes. He kissed me, I was pretty sure, my whole body was numb, but when I opened my eyes he angled the mirror and I could see uncountable diamonds hanging from my ears, sparkling against my neck. Herb rushed out to open my door and motioned for me to look at the largest house I'd ever seen, a Tudor with elm trees framing the front door like giant green fountains. He said, "We're home." And so we were.

I have no regrets; he *did* make me feel like a queen and, you know, three times we had to buy larger jewelry safes. But I'm just chattering away. Sometimes I lose track of what we were talking about. Did I mention the bus? That was the best; we covered all of America in the bus. My Herb did like to travel, so that's what we did—coast-to-coast, around the world—I think we stayed in every fancy hotel—everywhere, always first-class, but the bus was extra special. We rolled that thing down every back road we could find, just the two of us. Sometimes I lie on my bed with Coco, remembering those trips, and it's like I'm living them all over again.

Herb ordered her decked out like a luxury camper: queen-size bed, lace curtains on the windows, cherry wood trim, and the whole streamlined thing covered in stainless steel—I tell you, you needed sunglasses to stand next to her in sunshine.

We'd take turns at the wheel—now I know what you're thinking: A lady shouldn't be driving a bus—but there was no way Herb could stop me. Of

course, she was a GMC Hydramatic and a beast to steer—worse than Pappy’s Model T. My Herb fashioned a wide leather belt to hold me in the seat to get leverage to spin that wheel, and he welded an extension on the shifter so I could reach it. She was quite the cruiser, but those air brakes gave me the darnedest time.

One trip, in the Rockies, we’d gone over one of those high passes, and on the downgrade Herb was dozing off when I woke him by hollering, “Honey, what would you do if you lost the brakes?”

I can still see how his eyes got all wide, he yelled back, “I’d pull off on the shoulder and scrape the side.”

“Well, you better get away from that door,” I shouted, “because that’s where we’re heading!”

I thought for sure she’d tip over, but we hit an embankment and I kept that wheel yanked to the right, rocks and dust flying everywhere. It worked too, but that poor bus sure looked like hell afterward. I didn’t have to tell my Herb that the new bus needed gears I could clutch down to ease off the speed. Did I tell you I’m a natural at working a clutch? Came to me just as easy as wearing diamonds—and sometimes I wore diamonds even while I was driving!

I hope I’m not boring you too much. You’re such a good listener, and I do so enjoy telling the old stories. Sometimes I think a good memory is a curse; there are a few things I wish I could forget, but not many, and I do like remembering my Herb. You have a little something on your chin, but don’t worry; when that pretty young caregiver comes along, I’ll ask her to help straighten things out. What was I saying? Oh yes, that bus—and diamonds!

One year, in the ’50s I believe, we started at that Masters golf tournament, that’s in Georgia if you don’t know, then drove to Indy for the 500, same year Bill Vukovich went over the wall; couldn’t hide my tears that day. Then we headed west. I think we were crossing New Mexico—I remember the heat waves rippling off the desert far down the highway. Herb was sleeping, eyes tightly shut, so you can imagine I was working that accelerator pretty good, and we came behind another bus. I was just about ready to make the pass when I noticed Herb, eyes still shut mind you, flashing me that devilish grin of his. “Well, if you’re gonna pass them, why don’t we give them a show. Put on those chandelier earrings, and show ’em some skin while you’re at it.”

My Herb could be such a joker. He grabbed my jewelry box and found those earrings; most beautiful ones you ever saw—four inches long, with enough flashy diamonds to satisfy a thief. Same ones he gave me when I agreed to get married. You wouldn’t believe how sunlight bounced stars off those bangles. I kept driving, my hands on the wheel as Herb fastened each post. My neck tingles just thinking how his fingers raised goose bumps on my skin.

Just as I began the pass, I pulled my top off the shoulder and jammed on the gas. I pulled up even with the driver, he could see past Herb easily, then I blew him a big, red lipstick kiss and roared ahead. Herb was laughing so hard, I thought he might fall out the door.

We stopped at a campground that night and never left the bus. Can’t remember when I took off those earrings. Some men want their women demure and obedient but not my Herb. I can tell you he made me feel like a goddess.

We were up in northern Michigan, different trip, when my Herb woke up

and smelled smoke. And a good thing he did too. He pulled me out just as the smoke started thickening into clouds. We stood in our pajamas, watching that bus just exploding in flames. We decided to stick with cars after that, and Herb let me buy my own Cadillac.

I bought eight of them over the years; sold the last one on my birthday almost a year ago, March. Did you know that car had a trunk hood that would close itself? Just push a button. Hard to believe kids today won't ever know how good it feels to slam a trunk. I did receive a birthday card from the DMV, however—a notice, actually—but it seemed a waste of time to respond.

I do miss driving. Had a daily routine: would head down Main past the Walgreen's and elementary school, wave at the workers riverside—you know, one of these days they'll come up with a plan that works—then across the downtown bridge; always liked the view of the old paper mill, smokestacks still chugging away. Of course, downtown was getting a little scraggly. I never saw any "For Rent" signs when my Herb was on the city council. He warned them they'd better lobby to connect the interstate with downtown, but Herb said those boys couldn't see past their lunch plans.

But the part I liked best was visiting Greenwood Cemetery. All my family members are there; we have a section shaded by a magnificent sycamore. There's a space waiting right next to Herb's headstone. He wanted it to be huge—bigger than the ones marking all those blowhards he thought deserved only a mushroom patch. I miss visiting, leaving flowers, or just chatting with my memories. And I'll tell you a secret? My Herb isn't actually buried there. Can you believe we had agreed on a special spot to spread our ashes not two weeks before he died? For the life of me, I never expected to visit there so soon. But I didn't drive over there, wouldn't want anyone to see me since—I hope you don't mind my whispering—since I buried something else over there too. Even my lawyer doesn't know about that.

Oh good, it's time for dessert. What do you say we ask them for some cake? Did I tell you how good it is, especially the frosting? You know, they'll bring you cake anytime you want it; all you have to do is ask.