



*Diverse  
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#### Editor's Note

A smaller issue than we usually publish, but it's a good one. Included in this issue is a cover letter that encapsulates a mission we strive in publishing: *[We want our readers] to look into the eyes of the people [they] see every day and see if they catch a small glimpse of illumination...*

Enjoy the rest of your spring and the upcoming summer!

Krisma

*Diverse Voices Quarterly*, Volume 7, Issue 25

Cover art: *Flowing* by Cynthia Staples

Thanks to:

Mark Conkling  
Melanie S. Hatter  
Dennis Must  
Robert Rothman  
Janet Thornburg

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Dennis Herrell:** A former teacher. Later a sporting goods wholesaler. Then gift/card wholesaler. Now an antique dealer. During his last three years as a teacher, he wrote and sent out poetry, with some poems published. Wrote poetry during his career in sporting goods, but did not send out. Then in 1990s—more active in writing. In the year 2000, on July 5, he started submitting his poetry again, with some encouraging acceptances by *Atlanta Review*, *Aura*, *Aurorean*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Bogg*, *Ibbetson St.*, *Pearl*, *Poem*, *Poet Lore*, and others.

**Allan Johnston** is a writer, poet, and teacher with a Ph.D. from the University of California—Davis. His poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, *Rhino*, and many other journals. He has published three poetry collections: *Tasks of Survival*, *Northport*, and *Departures*; his chapbook *Contingencies* is forthcoming. He has received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, Pushcart Prize nominations, and awards and placements from Outrider Press, New Letters, Roberts Writing Awards, and other competitions. Originally from California, he now teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and DePaul University in Chicago.

**Laurel Kallen** serves as a communications leader for IBM and is a former mayoral speechwriter. Laurel is also a poet and fiction writer who has taught creative writing at the City University of New York. She is the recipient of the Stark Short Fiction Award and the Teacher/Writer Award. Her work has appeared in venues including *Atlanta Review*, *Big Bridge*, *Portland Review*, *Devil's Lake*, *Willow Review*, *Jabberwock*, and *Lyre, Lyre*. She is the author of *The Forms of Discomfort*, a collection of poetry by Finishing Line Press. Laurel has reviewed poetry for *American Book Review*, *Pleiades*, and *Big City Lit*. She writes by feeling uncomfortable at least once a day.

**Mercedes Lawry** has published poetry in such journals as *Poetry*, *Nimrod*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry East*, *Natural Bridge*, and others. Thrice-nominated for a Pushcart Prize, she's published two chapbooks, most recently *Happy Darkness*. She's also published short fiction, essays and stories and poems for children. She lives in Seattle.

**Debonair Oates-Primus's** bio included in this issue says it all. She is also a Ph.D candidate at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She currently teaches composition and literature at various colleges and universities in Philadelphia. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Stepaway Magazine* and *Verdad*. She is presently working on her first novel.

**Francis Rosenfeld** has published three science-fiction novels, *Terra Two*, *Generations*, and *Letters to Lelia*. She's working on her fourth book, *Fair*, a serial novel that can be found on her blog, [francisrosenfeld.com](http://francisrosenfeld.com), together with her collection of short stories.

**Larry Schug** is retired after a life of various kinds of physical labor and currently volunteers as a writing tutor at the College of St. Benedict Writing Center and as a naturalist at Outdoor U. (St. John's University). He lives with his wife, dog, and three cats near a large tamarack bog in St. Wendel Twp., Minnesota. His seventh book of poems is *At Gloaming* from North Star Press. His website is [www.larryschugpoet.com](http://www.larryschugpoet.com).

**Patty Somlo** has received four Pushcart Prize nominations and has been nominated for storySouth's Million Writers Award. Her essay, "If We Took a

Deep Breath,” was selected as a Notable Essay of 2013 for Best American Essays 2014. Author of *From Here to There and Other Stories*, her second book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories*, is forthcoming from Cherry Castle Publishing in January 2017. Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including the *Los Angeles Review*, the *Santa Clara Review*, *Under the Sun*, *Guernica*, *The Flagler Review*, *Sheepshead Review*, and *WomenArts Quarterly*, among others, and in sixteen anthologies. Her website is [www.pattysomlo.com](http://www.pattysomlo.com).

As a current resident of Jacksonville, Florida, **Charlene Stainfield** is studying political science and creative writing at the University of North Florida. She spends her days loving people, loving the Lord, and writing fiction. And laughing, of course.

**Cynthia Staples** is a writer and photographer living in Somerville, Massachusetts. Through words and images, she tries to capture moments and tell stories. Follow her creative journey at [wordsandimagesbycynthia.com](http://wordsandimagesbycynthia.com).

**Lee Varon** is a social worker and writer. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and published in many journals including: *Atlanta Review*, *Fox Chase Review*, *Milkweed Chronicle*, *Oyez Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Pleiades*, *Southern Poetry Review*. In 2015 she won the *Briar Cliff Review* contest for best fiction.

## HOME

I come from a place people hate to look at twice. A place that takes on different names, depending on the political ramifications. One name that most people hope to *never* call it is *home*. However, that's exactly what it was for me for most of my life. Like most people's homes, I have many fond memories of it, and what you are about to read are some of them. I don't want to mislead you: These are not what you are expecting. Mass media portrays urban life as a tragic war zone where only the lucky survive. I simply invite you to stand with me at my neighborhood bus stops and see what we see. I want my readers to walk down the same blocks I've been walking down my whole life and see if that tree that always looks lopsided to me looks the same to them. I want them to ask questions, not because they need an answer, but because there are so many to ask. I wanted my readers to look into the eyes of the people I see every day and see if they catch a small glimpse of illumination. When I look into their eyes, I see sunsets laced with dormant ambition. I want my readers to want a sunrise.

Some people love strange scents and tastes like gasoline or Brussel sprouts. Well, I'm obsessed with the sound my pavement makes. There isn't one sound in particular I favor, rather the collective noise the neighborhood makes as I walk down the different blocks. The clicking sound the dice makes when it hits the uneven concrete after the dope boys gullibly kiss them for good luck, mixed with the screech of the rusty trolley car brakes, combined with the shrill yells of blithe children running down the block, merged with the trembling vibration of the bass from the cars parked alongside the crowded sidewalks soothe me. I know some of the blocks are cracked, uneven, and decrepit, and some of the people are obnoxious, but together those sounds breathe life into the urban jungle I will forever call *home*.

Debonair Oates-Primus  
(originally submitted as a cover letter)

## **ANOTHER PLACE CALLED HEAVEN**

I'm sitting on the front-porch steps,  
barefoot on a late-summer afternoon,  
dog lying beside me,  
his golden fur luxurious in my hands.  
The lawn, freshly mown,  
fills my nose with a sweet smell  
and I can't hear an engine anywhere,  
only the sound of you in the kitchen  
chopping garden onions for supper.  
A cool breeze from the north  
keeps the mosquitoes away  
and a hundred helicopter dragonflies,  
indigo blue and fire engine red,  
maneuver through the air in impossible patterns.  
Bumblebees and migrating monarchs  
flit between marigolds and black-eyed susans.  
The birches and maples show the first hint  
of impending autumn glory.  
A cardinal, three raucous bluejays  
and a flock of goldfinches  
finish the sunflower seeds in the feeders  
as a small red squirrel with a white belly  
chatters angrily down at them from a whispering aspen.  
We have plans for making love tonight.  
It's hard to believe in another place called heaven  
that you must die to enter.

—Larry Schug

## WHILE READING FERLINGHETTI

A rainy December afternoon;  
while waiting for my computer to load  
I'm reading Ferlinghetti,  
*Matisse at the Modern, Magritte at the Met,*  
a long poem inside a large book  
populated with art and artists,  
Communists and communists, dancers,  
lovers of art, lovers of love, lovers of each other,  
a boy, a bicycle, a barrel, a wheelchair,  
nude women.  
On the computer screen a message appears; I'm rudely distracted  
by a woman who wants to connect with me, though only virtually,  
so I close the book, mark the page, click the mouse,  
say *Sorry, Lawrence, could you hold a minute,*  
I'm a lusty old goat living a fantasy life,  
I'm sure you'll understand,  
I'll get back to you as soon as I can,  
but I find this woman wants only acknowledgment,  
not a physical connection,  
so I put away my fantasy erection, turn back to the poem,  
resulting in a mental orgasm when I read of a Matisse nude,  
one hand on her nipple, the other on her vulva.  
The computer screen goes black and blank  
but the poem glows red with heat. It's where I want to be.  
I apologize to the poet. *Lawrence, forgive me.*  
*Can I meet you at the Modern, Fifty-Third Street in Manhattan,*  
*unless, of course, you've got to catch a flight of fantasy, yourself.*

—Larry Schug

## **ALMONDS**

Love came as a Luna moth  
a messenger for peace.

It perched on the painted window sill  
in a milky green suit with almond eyespots.

Its oval avocado wings tapped  
and spun the globed porch light

against a leaf and light-studded sky.  
With a tiny rip in its wing

it was almost a prince with a broken leg  
calling all goddesses for a healing

but it flew away easy as tissue paper  
a scatter of small stones in my ear

and then I remembered your eyes  
how I've always loved almonds.

—Donelle Dreese

## THE BOXER FROM DENMARK

by

Elizabeth Shannon Fehr

The streets of Manhattan are flooded with New Yorkers desperate to soak in the first sunny day of spring. Her jet lag is still flagrant, but she likes the way her heels click on the concrete of the park at Washington Square. Shafts of sunlight reach through the trees, and she basks in their warmth. It feels surreal to be back in New York, a fast seven-hour flight from the world she spent the last semester existing within. She already longs to be back abroad, craves the stimulation of foreign places—and, of course, there's the girl.

“Now, tell me all about Paris, Ellie.” Her grandmother's silver hair glistens in the light, and she leans on her cane as she walks slowly.

“Paris was amazing. It is the greatest place I have ever been.” Her grandmother recognizes her rosy beam and childlike enthusiasm all too well. A younger version of herself had once returned from a lengthy stay in Italy equally enthralled. Europe was a seductive place for a young woman who was searching for herself: the elegant food, the chic fashion, the liberalness of the wine, and the acceptable public displays of affection. Her grandmother saw it in her eyes, the lustrous glow accompanied by the lightness in her step.

“You met a girl there, didn't you?” Her granddaughter had reluctantly explained her sexuality in eighth grade when her mother caught her kissing her childhood friend, Olivia, in the laundry room. The family had shrugged it off as an experimental phase, but it was clear after the end of her sophomore year at college, after six years of exclusively dating women, that this phase was a permanent disposition. It had happened gradually. Stealing kisses in dark corners eventually morphed into subtle hints of sentiment in hallways to openly coming out before leaving for Brown University. Then one Thanksgiving she had returned home holding hands and semi-seriously committed to a girl named Tabitha from Rhode Island. Her politically liberal-minded parents had never scoffed at the idea. In fact, her grandmother had been enamored by the entire concept. “How liberating not to need a man,” she had declared.

Ellie taps her heels on the pavement as she walks making a distinct clicking noise with each step. “She's a boxer from Denmark. She was studying French as well, but her language skills were far more advanced than mine. We met through a Brazilian we both knew living in the city. He invited a large group of us out one night in Montmartre and that was it.”

Her grandmother stops to lean on her cane and smiles longingly. “What an adventure.” She stands in place for a while lost in a dusty reminiscence,

unable to focus on anything but the cerulean eyes and an Australian accent from long ago. “Love abroad is the best kind of love.” One night last summer her grandmother had a glass of Merlot too many, coupled with her blood pressure medication. That was the first time her grandmother had ever divulged about falling head over heels in love with a boy during her studies in Rome. Ellie had wanted to hear more. However, she worried bringing up something disclosed without coherency in the sober light of day would embarrass her grandmother.

“What are you thinking about, Grandmother?” Ellie brushes her hand against the old woman’s arm to pluck her from her reverie.

Her grandmother grins. “I vaguely remember mentioning him to you after our dinner at Gramercy Tavern. He was a looker, that one.” She sucks in a lungful of air and continues to walk at her slow pace. “Oh, to be twenty-two again.”

Ellie laughs softly with her grandmother as her heels keep clacking on the pavement, and the sun radiates down in stretches of gold through the trees. The whole world holds an alluring appeal, filled with divine magnificence and sanguine possibility. She has never been in love before, but she likes the way it changes her perspective and allows her to flit throughout her days. “So, whatever happened to the Australian in Rome?”

“Oh, you know, my dear, I went back to New York and he went back to Sydney. We talked for a bit after we parted ways. Every once in a while, we thought about a visit, but after a few years I met your grandfather.” She scratches her chin thoughtfully. “I’ve no idea what became of him.”

Ellie brushes a strand of hair from her face. She loves the boxer from Denmark; an invisible string exists, pulling them together even an ocean apart. “Did you love him?”

The old woman chuckles, smiles broadly, and a sparkle flashes through her eyes. “Oh yes, very much. He was my first love. The only one other than your grandfather that I..” She nudges her granddaughter with her elbow and winks slyly, “you know what with.”

Ellie’s used to this openness. Her family was graced not only with her grandmother’s formidable fortune, but with her inherent forwardness as well. “Did you ever think about trying to make it work?”

Her grandmother pauses to rest, then sits on a park bench and seems to consider the question. “When I left, I was certain we would find a way. But time changed things. I suppose it just wasn’t meant to be.”

Ellie joins her grandmother on the bench and folds her hands in her lap. “But you loved Grandfather?”

The elderly woman sighs tiredly. "Your grandfather was a good man from a good family. He was always a good provider, a good father. Sometimes in life you're faced with practicality. But I did love him." Ellie takes note as flecks of pain appear in her grandmother's gaze. She wonders if her grandfather ever knew about the Australian in Rome. "You shouldn't listen to me." She touches her granddaughter's hand realizing her disclosure. "I'm nothing more than a senile old woman now."

Ellie tenderly returns her touch with a troubled stare and gentle words. "You're so much more than that grandmother; don't be absurd."

Two full minutes pass as they sit silently on the bench together in the sunlight side by side. Ellie wonders if her grandmother had the choice to do it all over again, would she have sought out this blue-eyed Australian? Had she, would Ellie still be sitting there that day in Washington Square? Was true love like a magnet, a force so strong two souls bound to be together could not resist the scientific nature of attraction, or simply a game of courage and chance? Perhaps her entire future happiness rested upon one courageous conviction. Maybe otherwise she'd wind up married to some rich man who made well by his family, sitting in Washington Square, telling her granddaughter that once she met a girl, a boxer from Denmark, in Paris.

"I'm sorry, my love; I'm not feeling so well." Her silver hair still glistens, but the wrinkles that snake through her face seem to have cemented themselves deeper than before. "Do you mind terribly if we go back to the townhouse?"

"Not at all." Immediately, Ellie springs to action, helping her grandmother to her feet. The townhouse is only a small walk. She guides her grandmother patiently, unable to keep herself from questioning the return flight she arrived on a mere forty-eight hours before.

"I'm sorry to be such an old lady," her grandmother states half-jokingly.

Ellie grins encouragingly. "You're not old; you're just getting older." They both smile. "Thanks again for letting me stay." The two of them stand in the doorway for just a moment. The love, the absolute appreciation and warmth is palpable, like steaming apple cider on a cold fall day; it's a rare but simple sort of pleasure.

"You know your parents are going to want to see you eventually."

Ellie shrugs reluctantly. "I know." It wasn't that her parents had ever done anything particularly wrong. She simply prefers the less formal relationship she has with her grandmother to the austere primness of her parents' existence.

Once the two enter into the townhouse, Ellie dutifully helps her grandmother to her bedroom on the first floor. "Have a nap. I'll run out to the market and pick up some dinner." Ellie and her grandmother had always appreciated a good steak paired with a dry red wine. It was a tradition they had adhered to on Friday nights, once Ellie started taking the train into the city to visit her in the city on the weekends. This particular Friday evening is no exception.

By the time her grandmother emerges from her slumber wearing a fresh lavender dress and her favorite pearl earrings, the steak is a perfect medium-rare. A spinach and tomato salad sits in a glass bowl on the kitchen table beside two small glasses of Pinot Noir. Her grandmother smiles and kisses Ellie on the cheek. "You're too good to me my darling." Ellie has exchanged her electric pink tank top and jeans for a loose fitting white dress made of cotton. It feels right to be back in the Manhattan townhouse eating medium-rare steak and drinking dry red wine. Her grandmother listens intently as Ellie describes the views of Montmartre, the eclectic restaurants of the Latin Quarter, Le Louvre, L'Arc de Triomphe, and even La Tour Eiffel. She nods with satisfaction as Ellie depicts her wine tasting trip to Bordeaux and catching a train to London to see *Billy Elliot* on the West End. Everything seems effortlessly alluring as she lives vicariously through the youthful charisma of her granddaughter.

At the end of the night, Ellie starts to brew a pot of decaf coffee, as usual. Her grandmother gently pushes her hands away from the coffee pot. "I think we can do better than that." She smiles affectionately and opens the fridge. She plucks a bottle of cold Dom Pérignon strategically placed behind a carafe of orange juice and a carton of milk. "Champagne, my dear?"

Ellie grins widely and retrieves two champagne glasses. Then, she opens the bottle with a linen napkin and a large pop. She pours a generous amount of the bubbly liquid into each glass. "What are we toasting, Grandmother?"

The old lady smiles, her hair looks more white than gray outside the light of the sun. The wrinkles that plague her cheeks make her age obvious. Yet tonight there is a glimmer in her eye that infers a blithe happiness Ellie has not seen her exhibit in years. "To love, Ellie."

Ellie smiles at her grandmother who winks knowingly. "To love," Ellie repeats as their glasses clink. It's not too much longer before her grandmother excuses herself to her room. Ellie knows she'll have her bath, then change into her satin robe and sneak another glass of wine or a snifter of Cognac before bed. But she can't shake the piercing look of regret that washed over her grandmother's face when she spoke of the boy she had once loved. Ellie stares out the window facing into Manhattan. She sips the remaining bit of champagne in her glass and feels the string tug, the invisible string connecting her to the girl, the Danish boxer, who would now be back in Copenhagen.

\* \* \*

The next morning her grandmother arises belatedly. She stretches her arms and glances at the clock beside her bed. Then she reaches for the blaring phone on her bedside table. "Hello?"

"Good morning, Mother. I thought I may get to see Ellie today. Do you think she could catch an afternoon train to Stamford? We'd like her to be here for dinner." Her daughter was privy to every possible luxury growing up. Yet, instead of being appreciative and gracious, it had ultimately left her with a sense of entitlement and superiority.

"Hold on just a second; let me check." She places the phone on the table and stiffly removes herself from her bed. "Ellie, Ellie darling." She walks down the corridor to the next bedroom and finds the bed immaculately made and the room cleared of the suitcase and duffel bag Ellie had brought with her. She smiles to herself, then shuffles back into her bedroom.

"She's not here, my dear. Perhaps she's gone to the Hamptons for a long weekend with her friends, maybe even Block Island. They seemed to like that last year."

She hears an exasperated groan on the other end of the line. "Ellie isn't picking up her cell."

"Maybe it died. Don't worry, dear, she's a grown woman. Just give her some space."

"I hope it's not that Tabitha girl again."

"No, no, I don't think it's anything to do with Tabitha," she states grinning wisely. "Ellie probably had something come up spur of the moment and didn't want to wake us. I'm sure she'll be in touch."

"Good-bye, Mother."

"Good-bye."

The elderly woman sits merrily on her plush bed and carefully dials a number into the phone. "Martha? Yes, do you think we could relocate our dinner plans to my house? I can have something delivered, but I'd like to stay in. I still can't be bothered with that silly cellular phone, and I am expecting a call from Scandinavia."

She goes to the kitchen, brews a pot of strong coffee, and sits down on a heavy chair that is newly polished. She rubs her fingers up and down the gleaming wood, and although she tries, she can't stop herself from smiling and

crying simultaneously.

## **FINGERS ON THE PIANO KEYS**

You still miss me from the time:  
I drew upon your lips with my whiskey-  
laced fingers;  
the fingers that I'd danced across smooth  
dual-toned piano keys,  
to the tattooed flesh with engraved beast  
on the strapping bicep.  
Your breaths came through heavy and sweet  
stirring gone the cigar smoke,  
so close I could taste your frothy scent.  
You leaned toward, both arms resting  
on the console grand,  
where throbbing veins ached rhythms of  
the briny sea.  
There, at the scarred shadow of your funny bone:  
clear echo of painted ships  
and pine-knot smokes,  
a well-dressed suit of slate-flawed skin;  
dusky light swept gold the blunt-cut fingertips,  
slow whirl of the ceiling fan skimmed across  
your brown hair cool.  
Into the whiskey-varnished air and against  
the wisps of smoldering mist,  
my fingers flirted with the familiar refuge of octaves'  
crunched desire and toyed sleigh bells,  
upon the ivory white and charcoal black  
keys of the piano.

—Lana Bella

## **BRAIDS**

by

Patty Somlo

Lisa Lang lived three blocks north of Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, in a pocket of the neighborhood that hadn't yet benefited from the shine of gentrification. She had chosen to live there more than a decade before, after falling hard for a chocolate-shaded man who played the tenor saxophone. The man called Louis Jordan his entire life had recently started referring to himself as Fareed, without bothering to add Jordan or any other surname after. As soon as he became Fareed, the chocolate-skinned man donned a multicolored snug knit cap and a collarless cotton shirt with wide sleeves that he wore tucked out. On his feet, he slipped black Chinese Tai Chi shoes that hardly had any support.

The apartment where Lisa lived with Fareed was on the ground floor of a Victorian house that leaned several feet toward the south. Warm summer evenings, Fareed sat on the sagging porch and played what sounded like sad songs to Lisa. She knew very little about Fareed's previous life, only that he'd grown up in Chicago, raised by a single mom, having never set eyes on a man who claimed to be his father. When Fareed was still Louis Jordan, he lied about his age and joined the Army. He was only nineteen when he landed in Baghdad, a place he told Lisa he didn't have one good word to say about.

Lisa had met Fareed at a party on a Saturday night when she'd already drunk too much wine. He was sitting alone in the corner while everyone around him seemed to be talking way too loud.

"You're not joining the party," Lisa said, as a way to start some sort of conversation with this guy who she thought looked both handsome and a bit exotic.

He gave her what she later remembered as a rather mysterious smile, mysterious because she had to stare at him to be sure that he was smiling.

"I'm having my own party here. Watching," he said.

They went on to talk about people-watching and colors and music and all the things that sound so silly a few months later—but in the heat of flirting with a stranger seemed so profound.

In the same way that Lisa started talking to Fareed at the party and the conversation took off, winding around topics, barely pausing before moving on to the next one, the couple started spending time together without any

destination for their relationship in mind. Fareed lived alone in a one-room apartment the size of a shoebox, upstairs from a shoe repair shop, right off Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. The place made Lisa sad, its one skinny window letting in the slimmest noodle of light, so they mostly spent time in Lisa's two-room studio, walking distance from seven different cafes that served perfect lattes. It didn't take long for Lisa and Fareed to wind their lives around each other's and for Fareed to have more of his collarless cotton shirts hanging in Lisa's closet than in his own.

Like most musicians, and especially ones that play jazz as Fareed did, the man with one name that Lisa had fallen in love with didn't have a knack for making money. He could play the tenor sax in ways that caused women to weep or want to have sex with whichever man was near to where they were listening to that music, and he got a decent amount of gigs that kept him out until the wee hours of the morning. It soon made sense for him to stop paying rent on his place and for him and Lisa to look for a slightly bigger apartment than the one in which she'd been living. That's how they ended up in the sagging Victorian, where Lisa paid all the bills and worried that Fareed, out all night after gigs, had found himself another woman or two to fool around with.

It didn't take long for the heady early days of their relationship, full of endless talk and sex every couple of hours in all sorts of places and positions, to crash into the phase where nothing about the other person seemed the least bit right. Mostly, Lisa grew tired of paying the bills for a man who slept most of the day and stayed out nearly all night. She no longer enjoyed sitting at a small round table in a dark club, sipping cheap sour house white wine, listening to Fareed blow his horn. In fact, Lisa only went to hear Fareed play now in an effort to figure out which of the groupies—decked out in short, tight shimmery dresses and impossibly high heels—Fareed was spending the wee hours of the morning beside.

During a break one rainy Thursday night, days before Thanksgiving, Lisa spotted her. Even in that low light, Lisa could see that her rival was a beauty. She had pecan-colored skin and a body that made nearly every man in the room sit straight up, in order to get a better glimpse. Her royal blue dress caressed every curve and glimmered when she turned sideways.

Then, of course, there was her hair. Dusty-colored, as if she'd just come in from languishing under a tropical sun, the shade perfectly matched her skin. Those lovely shaded locks were wound in the tightest, teeniest braids all around her head, broken up from time to time with colorful beads.

The beauty with the enviable skin, hair, and shape joined Fareed in a dark corner of the club, seconds after he stepped off the stage. She settled her body into a space the tenor saxophonist appeared to make at his side, already accustomed to welcoming this woman. As if that wasn't enough to make the blood roar up to Lisa's face, she watched Fareed lean down and kiss the lips of that pecan-colored woman. Long after a quick peck would have died, the kiss

lingered, going on and on to pull up delicious feelings Lisa had once been all too familiar with, whenever she and Fareed stood or lay close to one another.

Like all too many women, instead of blaming Fareed, Lisa figured her man's straying had to be her fault. She pulled out a ten-dollar bill to pay for the sour wine, which included a healthy tip for the waitress, and hurried from the club, before Fareed came up for air long enough to notice that she'd even been there.

As soon as Lisa walked into the apartment, she hurried to the bathroom and gave herself the once-over in the full-length mirror that hung on the back of the door. Other than her eyes appearing puffy and pink from crying, Lisa couldn't find all that much wrong with the reflection she studied now. Nice pale skin. Slender, with sufficient curves. A long black tunic top over purple tights. Highlighted hair, ironed straight, framed around an oval face, with high cheekbones that drew attention to the pale green eyes.

Lisa stared and stared and quietly muttered, "What's wrong? What's wrong? What's wrong?" Without thinking, she lifted her right hand and ran it through that fine pale hair, and let the locks fall, then ran her fingers through the hair a second and then a third time.

"The hair," she finally whispered. "It's my hair."

\* \* \*

Lisa Lang had long been attracted to men she considered exotic. Most of the time this meant the men, first and foremost, had dark skin. She couldn't have said why. If pressed, as she'd been by friends once or twice, Lisa would have admitted that she found life tedious, and loving these men let her dwell for a short time in a more exciting realm. She understood that the guys she fell for were not the same ones who shared her bed. In other words, those men and their creative bent or colorful clothes or smooth dance moves let Lisa imagine that she was with someone else, a guy who could turn her otherwise dull life into a movie.

What she began to consider as she lay awake all night, certain that Fareed wouldn't come home, was the possibility of making *herself* into an exciting, exotic creature, rather than simply falling in love with those sorts of guys. She would begin that transformation with her hair.

*A white woman with braids*, she thought, the following morning as she made her way straight over to Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. *A white woman with braids*.

\* \* \*

The process was arduous, Lisa found out, after sitting for hours in the chair, staring at her reflection in the mirror, while talking to a reflection of the woman working on her. Lisa's stomach started to growl when the hairstylist and owner of the shop, Leticia Williams, began twisting strands of hair on the right side of her head, pulling so tight that Lisa feared the skin at her scalp would crack. She went through several stages, from hunger to thirst to getting over both, until she'd grown too tired to consider eating, and still Leticia twisted and tied, wove, and slid colored beads into place. Leticia talked and talked, mostly about *Jesus this* and *God that*. Lisa figured out right off that the woman was not expecting any sort of response beyond the occasional *uh-huh* that slipped unbidden from Lisa's mouth. And so Lisa's mind wandered, thinking about her life and wondering what else besides a new hairstyle she should do, now that this latest affair seemed to be coming to its conclusion. In between mentally taking apart her life and trying to put it back together in new and different ways, Lisa stole glances at her hair, not yet able to see herself objectively, even though the person in the mirror looked like a stranger. Did she like it? Didn't she like it? Lisa couldn't decide.

"Praise Jesus," Leticia Williams said, bringing Lisa back into the salon and away from her thoughts.

Lisa brought her gaze back to the mirror and studied her reflection. After hours and hours of Leticia's work, Lisa looked like a very pale-skinned version of Leticia, whose skin tone was closer to that of Fareed's.

"Praise Jesus," Leticia said again.

Lisa didn't know what to say. The hairdo was nothing less than a work of art. Leticia handed the oval-shaped mirror to Lisa and slowly rotated the chair. Lisa took in braid after braid, bead upon bead, all around her head. She had stepped into the door of this salon, Hairway to Heaven, hours ago, though it now seemed like weeks. In the process, Lisa had learned that Leticia wasn't just the hairdresser, but also was the owner and a self-styled preacher, and that on Sundays, the back of the salon got transformed into a small church. The signs around the salon promised customers that they would be *lifted up* by simply spending time there. Lisa looked at herself, not at all sure what to make of this thing she had done.

\* \* \*

Fareed did not come back. It was that simple and clean. Lisa got up every morning after sleeping on her collection of teeny-tiny braids and beads, running a hand over and around her head to make sure the entire apparatus had stayed intact, and then stared at the left side of the bed. The white, slightly puffy spread lay as smooth over Fareed's side as it had been the night before, when Lisa opened a narrow envelope for herself to slide into, on the right side.

Lisa let her work languish, even though she knew clients would soon call. Brochures, posters, advertisements. Stacks of sketches and notes sat piled on Lisa's drawing table, next to the window in the narrow kitchen. How could she work, come up with clever slogans, or for God's sake, draw, when her soul felt as if it was stuck inside her chest?

Sunday morning rolled back around and Lisa remembered Leticia and the little church at the back of the hair salon. It was an outrageous thought, but she let the idea come up and spread around in her mind. Lisa had never stepped foot into a church before. Nevertheless, she went ahead and let this notion spend some time arguing its case in her mind. Then she pulled a purple silk blouse over all those braids, making sure not to disrupt a single one, and slid into a pair of tight black pants and some small-heeled sandals.

Lisa heard the music before she'd made her way to wide Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. Rocking, swaying music that made her smile. As soon as she reached the sidewalk bordering Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, she noticed the cars lined up next to the curb and women stepping out, wearing hats the size of small umbrellas. Lisa realized she wasn't dressed right and considered turning around and heading home. But something kept her moving toward those big-hatted ladies.

The music was deafening when Lisa got directly in front of the salon. She noticed a group of men and women, standing and smoking cigarettes off to the side. Unlike the big-hatted women, this group was dressed in sloppy leather jackets and faded ripped jeans, too-short skirts and long, stretched-out sweaters. Lisa was the only white person in the crowd, but at least she felt less self-conscious about what she had on.

"I like your hair," Lisa heard a woman say.

Lisa turned to her right and realized that the too-skinny black woman standing just outside the circle of smokers was talking to her.

"Did Leticia do it?" the woman asked, having edged close enough to finger one of Lisa's little braids.

"Yes," Lisa said, patting the right side of her head now, as if that might make her feel less awkward.

"She an artist with hair," the woman said. "And you got the face for it."

The woman smiled at Lisa, who could see that this kind person was missing several of her top front teeth.

"You comin' to the service?" the woman asked Lisa now.

"I was thinking about it," Lisa said, her voice raspy with discomfort.

“That’s good. Leticia, she got the gift of preaching, like she got the gift of hair. Twice blessed.

“My name Miranda,” the woman said. “Ooh, I do like your hair. Maybe I get me some of them braids after I get paid next time.”

“I’m Lisa. Lisa Lang.”

The music was so loud, the whole time Lisa and Miranda had been shouting at one another. All of a sudden, the music stopped. Since everybody on the sidewalk had been screaming to be heard, it sounded for a moment as if a fight was taking place out there on the pavement.

“Time to go in,” Miranda said. “You sit by me.”

She grabbed Lisa by the wrist and pulled her inside, leading her to the back where she saw Leticia Williams. She was standing on the little stage, dressed in a wide-sleeved, ankle-length purple robe.

\* \* \*

Lisa barely heard a word of the preaching. Mostly she took in the rhythms and sounds. Leticia spoke sometimes in rhyme and the people filling the folding chairs and standing in back responded. One woman in a loud flowered dress got up midway through the service and belted out a gospel song that started slow and gradually speeded up, until everyone in the place was on their feet, clapping and singing and stomping.

The service entered Lisa through her ears and eyes but then flooded her spirit with nothing short of ecstasy. She found herself transported for a time out of her life, forgetting about Fareed and his other woman, the hurt and humiliation, the too-wide bed, the silence that even got her talking to herself out loud. In this funny space she felt connected to the other people here and the strange preacher-hair goddess, Leticia. The experience was pure, one that couldn’t be explained or analyzed.

\* \* \*

“Now, you gonna come back.”

These words coming from Miranda’s mouth after the service sounded more like a statement than a question. Lisa answered her anyhow.

“Maybe,” Lisa said.

“You welcome, you know. Don’t matter that you’re white. Everybody the same before God,” Miranda said.

“Thank you,” Lisa whispered and turned to start walking back home.

Just as Lisa turned, she caught a glimpse of herself, in the wide plate-glass window. Her small head, full of tight blond braids, was reflected back to her, inches below the name, *HAIRWAY TO HEAVEN*.

At that moment, the sun hit the gold letters that spelled out the name of the salon. To keep from being blinded by all that golden light, Lisa was forced to raise her right hand and shade her pale green eyes.

## **EAST OF EDEN**

by

Charlene Stainfield

Life is finite now. God trusted us with this precious gift, and we've ruined it. Only hours ago, He walked with us through the foliage and fauna of our garden. Regret lodges itself firmly in my throat, choking me. Our lives have never been our own, but we now possess the curse of blinding arrogance, the potential to be the lord of our own lives. I've never felt hate before, but the pressure rising within me is inescapable. I despise what I am now.

Eden is the full vision of flawlessness, a glorious spring that will never run dry. Our broken cisterns cannot compare. We are thirsty now, Adam and I. The cherub's face is stoic as we walk away, but the eyes mock our cracked tongues, and in this moment I know that we are fallen. The animal skins scratch against the thin skin of my thighs; it burns, and I crumple to my knees under crushing shame. My cheeks are damp; these are tears; and I watch them tumble into the dirt, returning as I will one day. They crawl down my face, the tracks diverging. Gently, they run over the sweet nectar that lingers on my lips, as if to wash away our betrayal. God looked upon our life, His beloved creation, and saw that it was very good. Mere moments after our fall from grace, I feel anything but worthy of such love.

Adam brings a heavy hand to my shoulder. For a moment I am overcome with gratitude at his compassion. Then his fingers slip down, dig painfully into the tender flesh of my underarms, and yank, dragging me up through the dust into the space where our breath mingles. His cheeks, too, are damp, but his eyes are clear, and the hardness in his gaze spears my heart. I want to please this man, and it unsettles me. I have never before looked upon Adam as my superior. But now, as he begins to walk away, I follow and imagine ways to melt the ice in his eyes. After all, it is only he and I.

Adam takes me that night, and I rejoice. His eyes are consumed with heat; it's never been like this, but I easily ignore the sting of our joining, focusing solely on his pleasure. The rough ground below me scrapes unforgivingly against the tender flesh of my back, but I refuse to stop our rocking. No longer will I be subjected to his cruel stare or his rough handling of my weary frame. In this way, I can serve him. His loud groans bring me back to the present as he pants hot breath in my ear, and I sigh as our bodies still. Now he'll hold me, curl up against me, and we'll sleep as we always have.

I'm jolted by his abrupt movement, up and out of me. He stands, stares down at me for a moment, and I see the heat in his eyes flicker and die. My knees knock together painfully as I sit up and reach out for him, his name

hovering on my lips. He turns and lies down a few paces away. I close my lips and lie down again. In a moment of clarity, I see that this life will be a bitter struggle, made significant by fleeting bursts of joy. Each night, our love will bloom and wither away in a matter of minutes, an aching reminder of our lost garden. And I will work tirelessly for the remainder of my days to please the man I love, this man that now needs what I give him, even knowing that I will never forgive myself for submitting to the desires of my heart. I gaze into the heavens above and wonder where our God has gone.

## IMMERSION

by

Yu-Han Chao

A lot of regret fills this little jail cell. I look at Helen who sits beside me, her black hair highlighted with gold done up in a messy bun, but she averts her eyes and shifts to turn her entire body away from me. Even fancy Helen with all her jewelry and expensive clothes no longer has a self-help quote from an American author or any more show-off westernized terms to share.

When you think of the typical woman in her late twenties or early thirties locked up in jail for solicitation and for being part of a prostitution ring, you don't think of someone like me. Sure, I'm pretty enough after makeup to get paid for having sex; my measurements are 34B, 24, 34; and my long, black hair shines like a shampoo commercial right after I leave the salon. However, most of the time I have my hair up in a ponytail or bun, wear thick black-framed glasses, and go about my day without a trace of makeup on. That's how people at school remember me: as a graduate student and teaching assistant at a reputable university. In my diurnal life, I am surrounded by sociology textbooks, highlighters, red pens, and piles of unmarked essays. Most of my colleagues and the students at school would never dream that I get paid to have sex. In fact, they probably think I'm an old maid. But the truth is, a part-time teaching assistant doesn't get paid much, maybe 350 NT, about 10 USD an hour. A girl's got to pay rent, buy clothes, eat, and take care of bills. My parents helped pay my undergraduate tuition, and I promised that once I was a graduate student, I would take care of myself. I felt bad that they were still worrying about providing for me although they were half-retired and running a little stationery store. I used to do my homework in the store after school, and I knew very few people actually came in and bought anything, and even when they did, it was something very small, maybe 10 or 20 NT. My parents needed every meager NT they made.

I thought it was fate that the day I got my first paycheck from my teaching assistantship, I met Helen. Originally, I had been thrilled that I got the tuition waiver and assistantship, and thought I wouldn't have to worry about finances. Generally, people are happy when they get their first paycheck. They celebrate; they go out and spend a good chunk of it. I, however, got depressed. The check wasn't enough to cover the monthly rent of 30,000 NT for my tiny Taipei apartment on the eighth floor of a dingy concrete building. I was going to need a roommate or a second job, possibly both.

It just so happened that Helen was in line in front of me at Everlast Bank. Helen fanned herself with a thick stack of cash, showing off. I could smell the greasy glue-and-paper smell of the bills. They smelled like envy. I

thought to myself, mostly to make myself feel better, that maybe she was a clerk at a small business, and her boss sent her out on a bank run. That was the only reason a woman so young would have an entire paper fan of thousand NT bills. Maybe I was staring at her money too much because she turned around and grinned right at me.

“It was a good week,” she said pleasantly.

“Week?” I asked.

This woman made more in one week than I did in one month. And she read my thoughts.

“Payday disappointing?” she asked, nodding in the direction of the check I was holding.

“No kidding. I won’t be able to afford eating this month.”

“Well, you know, I was just reading a book by a famous American author about how you should never think about how you can’t afford something, but instead, you should go look for the money to make it happen. You don’t have to cut out food; you could just get yourself a bigger paycheck.” Helen mimed a bigger, rectangular paycheck with her index fingers.

Who didn’t want to make more money? More easily said than done.

“Let’s have some afternoon tea after this if you’re not busy. My treat. I think my agent, Tan, might be able to hire someone just like you,” Helen said.

Agent? Was she a movie star? Movie stars don’t receive cash by the bundle like that. Porn? I was intrigued and desperate enough that after depositing my check I actually followed her out, listening to the crisp *click-clacking* of her high heels against the cement.

Half an hour later, we sat on the top floor of the fancy new Breeze Department Store. I took a sip of the imported Darjeeling tea from an elegant porcelain cup painted with yellow flowers, so dainty I thought it might break if I set it down on its matching saucer too hard. As I sipped my tea and carefully set the cup back down, Helen suggested I sell myself into prostitution. Only she didn’t call it that.

“We are freelance entertainers. What we do is public relations; in America they call it PR. Prostitutes, hell no! Prostitutes have no control over what clients they take, and sex is their only trade. We PR girls often have other talents or professions that we do during the day, like you said you are a teacher? I’m pretty sure we have another teacher too. There are also a few housewives, a law student, and I work at a cosmetics counter a few days a

week. I don't do it for the money though. I do it for the employee discounts and endless free samples."

Helen went on and on, and I listened with my mouth open.

"So what do you think?"

"I'm sorry, I can't do anything like that," I said, and meant it.

What would my parents say if they knew that the college education they paid for only amounted to my becoming a part-time prostitute? I reached for my jacket and purse, but Helen waved over a waiter carrying a tray filled with dessert: blueberry cheesecake, tiramisu, cream puffs, and green tea mochi. I would have said no, but before I said anything, my stomach growled, not just briefly, but two obnoxious, drawn-out *gwwwoo-ow-ow-ow* sounds. Helen laughed and pushed two desserts, fresh off the waiter's tray, in front of me. Too embarrassed to object, I picked up a little silver folk and ate. After tea and dessert, Helen handed me two business cards, one black, one pink. The pink one was hers. ("Call me if you need anything or just want to have afternoon tea again!") The black one belonged to her agent. ("His name is Tan; tell him I recommended you. He is a lovely man.") I accepted the cards with every intention of throwing them in the trash as soon as I was out of her sight, but soon forgot them at the bottom of the canvas bag I was carrying that day.

The next month, however, as I was withdrawing cash from an ATM, just about emptying out the savings account I'd been slowly adding to with Chinese New Year red envelopes since I was a girl, I remembered Helen and her offer. My dad helped set up the account for me when I was in third grade and I was supposed to add to it, not deplete it. There's no harm in having tea with Helen again, I figured. Besides, I am a sociologist looking for material for my research project. Maybe I should look into this industry. There could be thesis material in Helen's underground PR girl ring.

I went through everything in my closet. I tried on so many dresses and suits, a mountain of clothes and hangers had formed by the time I decided on a simple black shirt and jeans. I arrived early at the top floor of the department store and waited for her. I must have read every item and description on the menu five times, though the words slipped through my mind without registering. Finally, my new friend arrived in a slinky white dress with crystals on the neckline and slinky fabric that hugged her body. Her brown sunglasses had very prominent logos on the side, probably an expensive designer brand.

"So, you changed your mind?" Helen's lips sparkled with light pink lipstick with a glimmering sheen.

"I just wanted to find out more," I said, pushing up my glasses and fancying myself a sociologist doing important undercover fieldwork.

“I talked to Tan about you. He would love to meet you in person. In fact, he said that he might stop by in half an hour,” Helen said. “He’s bringing the book.”

“What book?” I was taken aback by her springing Tan on me, but at the same time intrigued.

“It’s the book with all the girls. A catalog. It lists everybody’s measurements, includes a current salon picture, and also specifies interests, hobbies, talents and sexual preferences.” Helen gestured with her hands as she spoke, like it was the most normal thing in the world, a menu of purchasable woman.

“Sexual...preferences? You mean like if I prefer a man or a woman?” I asked.

“That, of course is a basic thing, telling us what you are open to. But also, do you like S & M? Are you good at role playing? Are you dominant or submissive? Are you willing to dress in costumes such as schoolgirl outfits? Do you like rubber garments, pain, or bondage?”

I knew such things existed, but I never thought about them in conjunction with myself or regular people. Were all the clients perverts? I’d only had groping-beneath-covers sex with an ex-boyfriend from college, and it had been awhile. Have all men become perverts?

Tan arrived a few minutes later, dressed in a cream-colored suit that contrasted with his brown sunglasses. His brown briefcase, which he set on the table after shaking my hand, sported a heavy-looking metal lock. I wondered if the briefcase was filled with cash or shiny gold bars, like in the gangster movies.

“You have a real air of purity about you,” Tan said, looking me up and down.

He unlocked the briefcase and took out a leather-covered book, one like the typical salon-quality photo album. It featured women in schoolgirl outfits or white dresses, with innocent, wide-eyed facial expressions; whip-wielding women in rubber suits with blood-red temptress lips; women with bleached hair in bikinis; punk rock chicks on motorcycles. The text beneath the pictures were too small for me to read quickly, but I noticed numbers in bold: height, weight, and the bust-waist-hip measurements of each of the women. My mind raced as I pictured borrowing Tan’s catalog and quoting parts of it for my master’s thesis. It might even be published as a book. Sex sells, after all. Maybe I should interview the women and get some fascinating case studies.

“I think you would be great as a sexy librarian,” Tan said, interrupting

my thoughts. “And you are very educated. You will be able to carry on a good conversation, which high-level businessmen and government officials love.”

“Government officials?” I asked.

“Sure, we have all types of clients. Many rich and influential men, and they are rather selective. I only sign the best girls, classy women like the two of you. And, of course, utmost secrecy is imperative.”

“So what would I have to do?” I asked, already plotting to avoid legal issues by drafting disclaimers and using pseudonyms in my thesis.

“Spend some time with the men. You can pick and choose which clients and appointments you want to take, and spend some quality time with them at an exclusive location.”

\* \* \*

The exclusive locations turned out to be seedy motels on the outskirts of Taipei. Between gray walls and faded wallpaper, I learned to say the things each client wanted to hear, act out the parts they expected of me while wearing the outfits that made their dicks hard. I became one of Tan’s best PR girls because secretly, I took such great notes. Back home on my laptop, I had an Excel file that listed information about each client; the whole time I had my thesis on my mind. Nobody had done research like mine before in Taiwan—it was groundbreaking fieldwork—no sociologist in the past had made such sacrifices for her work, personally wading into the murky sex-worker ocean, as it were. I could become a famous author and be invited onto TV shows, maybe even have my own call-in talk show.

In short, the work sucked me in. Every other day I spent a few hours of my free time in a motel with one man or another. They gave me gifts: spa memberships, designer bags, jewelry, and, of course, cash. I documented everything in my Excel file, meticulously recording each non-monetary gift and its market value.

Up until the day the police barged into the motel room and arrested me for one account of solicitation and a second of adultery, adultery being illegal according to Taiwanese law, on a certain level I really believed I was doing serious sociological research.

“It’s called immersion,” I said to the police officer, a young man with a crew cut and pockmarked cheeks.

“I don’t care what you call it, doll; it’s illegal.”

“I am a graduate student in sociology. It’s a sociological term, to immerse yourself in the environment of the people or careers you are studying.”

He made me raise my arms behind my head and handcuffed my wrists.

\* \* \*

What happened was one girl was caught by the wife of one client, and the police got involved. That PR girl made a deal with the police and gave up Tan's information, which led to a search warrant and arrest. Naturally, the police got all the phone numbers, the detailed menu of girls in Tan's book, and all the evidence they needed to catch most, if not all, of us.

"A total of nineteen girls were caught," Helen whispered.

"No men?" I quipped.

"Tan was booked for possession of all sorts of illegal drugs too: amphetamines, ketamine, cocaine, and ecstasy. He'll be in jail for much longer than all of us put together, or maybe they'll just put him in a chair and *bzzzzzzz*."

I shuddered.

Some women would be bailed out by their (very angry, probably divorce-ready) husbands, and some by friends or siblings, but who would bail me out? I couldn't ask my colleagues. I would be fired from my teaching assistantship, dismissed by my university, which despite accepting students of all religions, identified itself as a conservative Catholic institution.

"Do you think one of our clients would bail us out?" I asked Helen.

Helen threw her head back, laughing like a crazy person. "You think those men would touch us with a ten-foot pole right now? They will deny everything and anything they ever had to do with us! Those men don't want to be associated with prostitutes! It would ruin their careers, businesses, marriages... Are you nuts?"

Helen had never called herself or me a prostitute before. And I had a feeling she wouldn't be the only one.

I don't even want to imagine what my parents and family would say about the girl who was so good but now is ruined...

## **IS THERE A TREE IF YOU DON'T HEAR IT FALL?**

I have studied how to pitch my voice  
how to dress for success or sex—

there is some overlap. Guess who's using the  
mystique of the introvert now. I've looked at

how to rebound on the trampoline and how  
to spin on the dance floor and when

to stop. I will always live with worry—  
don't talk me out of it, darling. Don't

speak of peace though there is peace in  
the moss on the tree trunk and on

the forest floor. It is a nano-peace  
peeking through the burlap of time. I don't

believe what you believe and that isn't necessary  
for love or marriage. Don't give me your

perfect answers. It is you I love, not  
your tranquility. Show me the next breaker and

I will decide to ride it or dive  
under. I will salvage only a few raindrops

out of the storm.

—Laurel Kallen

## **FILLING THE SPACE BETWEEN J AND F**

Little black symbols paint syncopated rhythms as my fingertips pause between sentences, returning faithfully to J and F, a force of habit gained from long practice.

I gaze at pictures of my mind and grasp at them with childlike awkwardness, dress them in words and send them to the patiently waiting fingers.

Wit is so tangled in my fingers that the brain can't isolate it, much like the feet don't disengage from the hearing of music in a complicated dance.

Gentle small scale acrobatics, if you think about it, so second nature it becomes, so second nature...

The backlit keys float over diminished light, enough light to guide me if I need it, but I don't, not anymore, not for a while now. The slim bumps on J and F gently nudge the tips of my fingers as hands glide on the keyboard swiftly, assuredly, fluidly, free.

—Francis Rosenfeld

## **SOLDIERS' HANDS**

Battered, scabbed,  
etched with dirt, fingers  
that must be nimble,  
must articulate and choose,  
pull and stroke, these necessary  
hands on a thin line, strung  
in the air and traced on uneasy ground,  
in bad dreams, in stink of fear.  
How it will be the fingers,  
the full hands deciding to cross  
the line, what line is held,  
what line imaginary.  
Hands in prayer and killing.  
Hands without love, cupping echoes.  
Soldiers offering their hands  
as a gospel of dust settles  
and a blue hallelujah sky comes clean.

—Mercedes Lawry

## **SURVIVORS**

Some days are raw hot wind  
dark maroon blossoms of moods

bordering on mechanical  
and here we are blinking

trying to free gummed lashes  
from something flying in the air

a sour mash of fear and fatigue.  
I know you had to walk through

a labyrinth of knives, but look  
your ankles are still smooth.

You are still warm and awake  
after listening to the ocean moan

after treading the web lines of a leaf  
and wearing a stinging fur of snow.

The lanterns are underwater  
but they illuminate the starfish

suspended near the surface  
so we can see what we are given.

The virtuosity of another day  
to make it right this time.

—Donelle Dreese

## **MAN READING BRAILLE**

Chameleon eyes turn each way  
seemingly useless, to blend to all  
in the bus we ride in. thus  
become one, inert stuff  
of bus, useless solid substance  
some way, and yet

these hands dance as gulls on beaches,  
coasting over the beach of the book,  
three fingers going one way, one  
the other, in both English and Arabic  
flowing over wattled surfaces,  
vellum-thick, cream-colored pages:  
tracing the goose bumps of meaning.

—Allan Johnston

## WORDLESS

An impoverished intellectual am I,  
too poor to own many words,  
or any rich quality words  
from posh lawyers who keep speeches  
safe in their chambers.

None of the words from pigtailed girls,  
hands wiggling earnestly at the teachers,  
who themselves hide synonyms from the dumb  
tongues of glacial-thinking boys.

No words of reverence from the gesturing  
preachers or high priests in sanctuaries,  
trading words straight from God  
for payment into the kingdom.

Philosophers fling their words  
into the sky to float as clouds  
of vaped meaning or dense rationale,  
high above my earthy head.

Politicians save their words of promise  
for elections and compromises,  
sliding them in and out  
like dildos in the romance of assignments.

I am left with *a, an, the* articles of communication,  
*for, of, with* prepositions, no propositions;  
the ever-safe compliance of *yes, OK, thanks, please,*  
moments of silence, hesitations, maybes, and shrugs.  
I am an ellipsis without the implied meaning.

—Dennis Herrell

## **ANCESTORS**

They come with the smell  
of ground coffee  
honeysuckle,  
they come when you  
taste hominy  
and scalded milk.  
They're waiting at night  
when you turn over—  
a whisper—  
they don't want  
to be forgotten;  
their stories may be sordid  
but they're theirs.  
They want you to tell them—  
nobody else can.  
They won't leave you alone.  
Step  
into the muck of the swamp  
dizzy with cicadas,  
and those voices  
you've been ignoring.

—Lee Varon

## CLOSE TO THE WATER

by

Nancy Scott Hanway

I see my body as a stone, white and clean, waiting on a riverbank for a collector. Another inmate—one of the few who will speak to me—told me that she sees us as kittens lined up and waiting for the moment when we will be grabbed and tossed into a sack that gets whirled to the center of a pond. She's here because she bludgeoned her own brother for money. She says that her friend—who forced her victims to drink bleach—imagines us as baitfish thrown into the ocean to attract the real catch. That's the most interesting idea, I think. That we're sacrificed as a way to bring others to the surface.

Most people talk about death as going toward a bright light. I wonder sometimes if the fact that we on Death Row see ourselves dying in water shows the essential difference between us and the rest of humanity. Or could our attraction to water—a source of life, but also of the cause of so much suffering—be the reason we became murderers in the first place?

I've refused to meet with the female minister who visits sometimes with her big Labrador. I'd have to be shackled during those visits, which is humiliating, and the guards enjoy bullying us in front of the pastors, whom they call "killer suck-ups." But mostly, I can't bear the thought of meeting the dog's eyes. That kindly, hopeful gaze that invites you to love. My daughter was eighteen when she died, but she never gained more than a three-year-old's mental capacity. She always looked at me with those enormous, begging, dog eyes.

Her disability occurred the moment she was born. Caused by meconium, a beautiful name for fetal shit. Overdue babies poop in the womb, releasing a sticky tar—made of mucus, amniotic fluid, bile and water—that they can breathe in during birth. That's what happened to my daughter, born sucking shit into her lungs. By the time they aspirated it all, she had been deprived of oxygen for five full minutes.

And so I cared for a toddler for eighteen years. A body out of sync with the mind, as if one dimension of time had stopped while the other continued. After she reached puberty, my daughter needed constant vigilance, so I had to give up my work as a librarian, which was a great sacrifice. For several years, my former colleagues tried to provide comfort by reminding me that I would have hated what has happened to libraries, hated that the peaceful smell of rotting paper has given way to the hot stench of computer plastic.

But I would have seen that people are still in love with words. And I loved

our library, which overlooked the Pacific along the rocky coast north of San Francisco. Every night, after I locked the big front doors and set the alarm, I turned to contemplate the ocean. Our town attracted tsunamis because of the shape and depth of our bay, but I never believed that the sea would invade us again. In fact, I thought that we were protected from the dangers of the world by that vast expanse of water.

I was working at the library the day my daughter was assaulted. She was thirteen and in state-supported day care when her caregiver got sick and they brought in a substitute. My daughter was extraordinarily lovely: dark-haired and voluptuous, with a beautiful smile. One day the sub promised her a cookie to go outside, where she was shoved into a car, taken a few hundred feet to the marina, and raped for hours by three men in the cabin of a speed boat. Then they brought her back to school.

When I picked her up that day, she was crying and rubbing her crotch, saying, "Hurt! Hurt!" I was embarrassed, and I hit her hands away. "Stop that, honey. That's not nice."

The sub shrugged. "I don't know what's going on with her."

"She probably has her period," I said. My daughter often complained of pain during her cycle, and the blood scared her. I blushed as I said this because I hated having to discuss the details of my daughter's newly adult body. This was what I disliked most about mothering my permanent baby. That was how I thought of her. Remembering that she was a baby kept me from hating her when I couldn't pursue a PhD because I couldn't afford a sitter. Or when a man flirted with me at the library, and I knew that the minute he met my daughter he would drop me. When I couldn't go out with friends, and they rarely came to my house because my daughter drooled, forgot to wipe the snot from her nose, had accidents on the rug.

We did have one sanctuary. The one place where we could have company was on our little sailboat, a 19-foot Menger Cat: a broad-bellied catboat with an enormous sail. My daughter would sit quietly, her hands playing with the life jacket, closing her eyes to feel the air on her face. It was the one place where we both felt at peace. Sometimes she trailed her hand in the water as we sailed. We often went right after school, and it calmed her down enough so that she would eat her dinner quietly, let me give her a bath, and watch cartoons until bed.

On the day she was raped, I took her home and gave her a bath right away. There was blood on her underwear and something else that was viscous and mucousy. I stared for a long time before I realized what I was seeing. My daughter began to cry again. "Hurt!" Blood floated on the surface of the water.

It was lucky that I wasn't seeing anyone at the time, so there was no boyfriend to blame. But the cops treated me like a criminal, as if I had made

the rape happen by the fact of having a beautiful daughter. And there was no hiding the event from anyone I knew. When the details came out during the trial, everyone in town knew who the victim was simply by the description.

Someone in a grocery store—a young man I'd never met—came up to me and asked, "You hiring out that girl?" and then walked away laughing with his friends. The next-door neighbor's son began to watch my daughter from his bedroom window. One day the mailman told her she was wearing a pretty skirt. When I erupted from the house to scream at him, he gave me a look that was pitying and hostile, as if to say that my daughter was fair game.

I waited for five years for the men to be brought to trial. Only one of them was sent to prison. The sub got a suspended sentence for telling on the others. Two of them got away free because I had washed away so much of the evidence in the bath.

My daughter would never set foot on our boat again. When I tried to get her to go, she began to kick and scream as if I were torturing her. The doctor had promised me that she didn't have the capacity to relive those memories. I hadn't believed him. I thought that he was just trying to soothe a distraught mother. And besides, even dogs remember the great hurt that was done to them. They hold it in their bodies. Their gaze changes from trusting to fearful, and they duck when they see your hand, even if you have only given them love.

We had a little bath tradition that emerged over time. Upon stepping into the tub, my daughter went underwater and blew bubbles out of her nose. Then I lifted her head up and started shampooing while she took a huge gasp of air and smiled. I thought she would abandon this routine after what had happened, but it seemed as if her fear had to do with the boat—with what had happened on the water's surface—not with the water itself.

I had painkillers, leftover from my root canal. I crushed two of them into her ice cream and waited until she was sleepy before helping her into the bath. When she gave me her big puppy smile and put her head down to blow bubbles, I held her down for longer than usual. That big gulp of air she usually took turned to water, and she was too drugged to fight me. She made a few big motions with her arms, like a fish that wants to move quickly to escape a predator, and then I looked away until she stopped moving.

It was the only thing I could do. It was done out of love, not hate. So the fact that some inmates won't speak to me because I killed my own daughter is just laughable.

And I don't know if they really have a right—the women here who killed out of viciousness or greed—to imagine themselves dying in water, joining that liquid body that holds us all together as we sink below the surface of things that can harm the innocent.

## **STORIES**

Why do the dead keep  
telling us stories?  
Insistent,  
keeping us up at night,  
nudging us when we pass cemeteries?  
We think we escape them  
but they know how to return  
to creep into a cedar waxwing's  
shrill cry,  
flutter up  
under the breastbone  
when lavender  
spills into twilight.  
Try to go on with your life,  
pretend you don't hear them  
chattering in the corner—  
when ghosts come  
to brush your hair.

—Lee Varon