

Issue Two

Spring 2013

# Wilde Magazine

A Magazine of Art and Literature with a *Queer* Edge





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Issue Two      Spring 2013

Dear Reader,

Wilde Magazine began in summer or 2012 with the hopes of creating a view into the lives of GLBTQ individuals through art and writing. We seek to create, not just an exhibition of their work, but to showcase the community and create a discussion.

Enclosed you will find art and writing from talented members of the community, young and old. We've featured a portfolio of writing from The Queens Writing Coalition for Creative Seniors. We hope this will shed some light on the experiences of an underrepresented group in the community through their fictional and autobiographical writings.

We hope you enjoy reading what we hope will be one of many intersectional views into the queer community, and will continue to follow Wilde Magazine's progress as we come out with new issues showcasing new people, demographics, and their experiences.

Thanks for reading!

Sincerely,

Nicole Wilkinson

## Editor-in-Chief

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# A Stranger Asks: Who's The Man and Who's The Woman?

*Stephen Mills*

She wants to know how to see us.  
How to build our boxes. How to paint  
our portraits, our diagrams, our insides  
spilled on mattresses wet with bodily  
fluids. She wants to put us back  
together again. Place Part A into Part B.  
She wants to know if I don a party dress  
and you a tuxedo. If I scrub the toilet  
and you change the oil in the car.  
She wants to know if we were "normal,"  
who would carry the children? Who  
would pack the lunches? Sew the Halloween  
costumes? Punish the little brats  
with a wooden paddle? She wants to know  
whose body part goes where. How to  
connect our dots. Wants the answer  
to the equation: one man + one man =  
She's bad at math. Needs a tutor.  
What if Part A goes into Part B  
and sometimes C and vice versa?  
She doesn't understand.

# Wife and Wife

*Scott Wiggerman*

*starting with a Dickinson line (#109)*

By a flower, by a letter, by a nimble love.  
Through lithe and limber, thick and plump, theirs is nimble love.

A hummingbird quivers in the cup of her red hand.  
A tiny heartbeat is all it takes: our thimble love.

Partners of the heart: the silent language of knowing.  
I stand in wonder, a willow with arms akimbo, love.

My burning eyes, your stormy lips—who wrote this script?  
This Chinese tattoo. I'm thinking it's a symbol. Love?

The heat of the day dribbles down breasts, hips, buttocks.  
The best tools for boring: a brace, a bit, a wimble, love.

Curlicues of cats sleep soundly on their laps.  
Awake the beasts! Bang a gong or strike a cymbal, love!

The show's sold out, and no one else can buy a ticket.  
Our garden's filled with just three sounds: trumpet, timbal, love.

# Calendar

*Jerrold Yam*

The day I pushed you into a frame  
and gave you lodging on my table  
was the first time I allowed myself  
to forget. Each morning as the sky  
lighted its edges on fire I would bid  
you a glance, your edges brushing  
the frame's uncompromising silver  
as if waking because of me. By the  
second week, dust like quiet tears  
knocking on the barren plateau of  
your face, there was no hesitation,  
fear of not belonging to your body  
receding to a myth I could finally  
understand. Now everything reads  
neutral as sky. Names you emptied  
from me are yours to keep, nestled  
in the muted parody of your lips:  
gamble, mistake, boyfriend, short  
of what love has made us become.

# Between Wing and Water

*Adam Berlin*

We got away together for two nights the way we said we would. We'd fantasized about trips like this, calling it running away when we talked about it, but we weren't really running and it wasn't forever, the word we said in each other's ears, low-voiced. The reservation was for two nights. That meant we'd return.

We had a full day together after our first night. We ate the breakfast that came with the hotel room, eggs and potatoes and fresh blueberries put out in small individual saucers. Usually I had cereal if I ate breakfast at all. When she came to the city, she brought muffins from Grand Central Station and we would eat those, usually around noon or one, when we smelled of sweat and each other. The muffins were cranberry or bran or carrot, the best, moistened by strands of fresh coconut from a place called Cucina, kitchen. I didn't have a kitchen. I had a room and a bathroom on a street in the Village. She had a house full of rooms in the river town of Hastings on the Hudson. She had two guinea pigs and two cats and a pug puppy that licked my hand when I was there the one time, and she had a daughter and a husband. After breakfast, we drove to the beach.

Shelter Island was easy to get around. There was Route 14 running North and South, cutting the island in two and connecting the two points of ferry departure. We decided the name came from the island being sheltered by the two forks of Long Island, but we didn't know the official reason. The woman at the front desk, an old woman who went over the local map with us as if she were seeing the hotel's brochure for the first time, had marked off the best beaches. We decided on a beach called Ram's Head. We drove on Route 14 and then veered off on the side roads, through woods where the foliage was thick and shadowed and where deer could hide until dusk, past big houses and bigger houses with gates and tennis courts, and then we saw the water. There were signs around the lot that warned against parking without a permit, but there were no cars in the lot and it was a Monday and the island didn't look very crowded. We didn't feel like wasting time looking for a permit. We were pretending to run away and in that mindset we could act like desperados, living off the land lawlessly.

“Are you sure?” she said.

“I’m sure.”

“They wouldn’t tow us here, would they?”

“We’re the only ones here. If they give us a ticket we can rip it up. We’ll be right here, anyway. The beach is right here.”

It was a nice beach and our own. That’s what we wanted. To be alone, just us, away. We could see one of the forks in the distance and some boats and then the expanse of water that went forever to a landless horizon. We put out her blanket and undressed to our bathing suits, a first time for us, and put lotion on each other, another first time for us. She was already tan, the Sicilian in her, a different tan from me. Her hair was a gold shade of red that was more gold in the sun. I lifted her hair so I could get the back part of her neck, not because she needed protection but because I liked that part of her. I liked all the parts of her. With other women there was at least one part I didn’t like. The woman I was seeing had nice parts too, but she wasn’t the kind to run away with—we’d never had that kind of runaway relationship, even if it was just a notion.

“Here comes a cop,” I said.

“Where?”

She turned to look, but there was no car, no officer, no one.

“Stop,” she said, and smiled.

I loved her smile. I loved all her different smiles, but I loved that smile the best. It was young. It

was one of the youngest things about her.

“That intern knew what she was talking about.”

“What intern?” she said.

“The one who marked this beach on the map.”

“She was an old woman.”

“She was young next to the one who checked us in. The one who checked us in looked like the old woman’s grandmother. The old woman’s a summer intern.”

“Sure she is.”

“She is. Didn’t it seem like the first time she’d ever pointed out the best beaches?”

“It did,” she said and laughed.

She had a great laugh. She had many great laughs. I always tried to make her laugh so I could hear it and then her laugh would stop and her smile would stop and I’d look in her eyes and see right through.

“It’s a beautiful view,” she said. “Look at the clouds.”

“They look like a movie set.”

“They do.”

“The one above us looks like a big foot.”

“Is it going to crush us?”

“It’s thinking about it.”

We stayed in the sun. We held each other’s hands and her fingers moved over my hand. She jiggled her foot. She had a lot of nervous energy, but her face always looked calm, almost far away. When I’d first seen her that was what I first noticed. Her faraway look. A space cadet. Just another spacey artist with no chance for success, I assumed. We were in a writing group together. Five women meeting in a Village apartment, reading each other’s stories. I’d noticed her wedding ring and thought, well, I have no chance. She’s married. She’s straight. Then I spoke to her and then I read her work and I thought I might be wrong. In her first story she’d written a description of a woman sitting on a bench overlooking the Hudson River. The woman is reading a book and then she puts it down, closes her eyes and her mouth parts, just slightly. The mystery is there. It reminded me of a description I might write.

I could feel the sun getting warmer and starting to burn, but I didn’t want to move. I liked the way her hand felt and her foot against my ankle and the heat.

“It feels like we’re far away,” I said.

“That’s the nice thing about an island. We’re cut off.”

“I can see the forks. I can see the tines of the fork.”

“You can’t see them if you look over there.”

“It needs palm trees. Palms would make it even farther away. Have you ever been to the Caribbean?”

“We went to St. John’s one winter.”

I looked away from the forks. I once went to St. Martin with a group of women for a week. I remember the first morning waking up and hearing all of these new sounds like I was in the middle of the jungle. Birds mostly. The birds sounded different. I went to the beach every day and snorkeled

and swam and ate out at night and drank beer at bars overlooking the ocean and slept with two of the women. The week went fast.

“The time’s going fast here,” she said.

It was like she knew what I was thinking. She did that a lot, and with only a day left, I didn’t want it to go fast.

“Don’t,” I said.

“I know. I won’t think.”

“Don’t think.”

“I won’t.”

“Let’s go in,” I said.

“You test it first.”

We stood and walked over the sand and rocks. It was impossible to look graceful with all of the rocks pressing into our feet, but I tried. She didn’t care about that, another thing I liked. I stepped into the water and it was cold. There was hardly any break to the waves, no white water, just a lazy coming in and going out.

“How is it?”

“It’s cold. It’s not bad.”

“I’m not hot enough to go in yet,” she said. “I’ll stay in the sun a little longer.”

“I’m going in.”

I walked in up to my knees and then dove in and pulled my hair back under the water. I swam out and then parallel to the beach and she watched me. I pretended that my leg was grabbed, that I was pulled under violently, coming up for air before I went under a final time. A shark attack off the Long Island shore. A pretend drowning. I splashed around and she laughed and then I stopped and swam some more. I came in on the small roll of a wave that passed me and then came in on the next non-wave and stood. I adjusted the strap on my bathing suit.

“You did it,” she said. “You survived.”

“It’s nice. Come in.”

“Maybe later,” she said.

We walked back to the blanket and I dried off and watched her stretch out on the blanket, her skin gold and her hair gold and her eyes squinting in the sun and from smiling and I leaned over her, blocked the sun from her face so I could see her eyes open up.

“You look beautiful,” I said.

“No.”

“You do. You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you. So are you.”

She didn’t even know it, not completely, and I liked that about her too. It didn’t really matter to her. She knew other women looked at her, but she didn’t preen or pose the way I sometimes did, especially when I was out among strangers. I did that too much. Went out among strangers. It was great to be away from all that. Just here. Just us. A car came down the hill and parked next to her Volvo. It wasn’t a police car with an officer looking to hand out tickets for beach parking violations. It was two old women. They slowly carried their beach chairs to the sand. It was no longer our private

Butterfly Book Sculpture *Carrie Siems*



beach.

“Interns,” I said.

She laughed.

“They’re on their break from the hotel. They get an hour beach break each day.”

The women sat down in their beach chairs, two audible sighs from the effort. One peeled an apple and handed the other a piece. They had been together a long time.

“I hope my daughter is having fun,” she said and I felt the sadness in my throat immediately. She had a husband. She had a daughter. She had a life that was not the life we had here, a two-day life.

“I’m sure she is,” I said. “Will the camp take her to the beach?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. They have a lake.”

“Is it in the Berkshires?”

She squinted her eyes. Her skin was warm.

“I don’t know,” she said. “That’s terrible.”

“It’s in Massachusetts, right? It must be the Berkshires. I’m sure she’s fine.”

We stayed in the sun. We fell asleep for a while. When we woke, the two old women both had their eyes closed. A gull picked at a piece of red apple peel in the sand.

“Are you hungry?” I said.

“I’m fine.”

“Should we go to another beach?”

“Let’s. Let’s see the rest of the island.”

She looked at the sky.

“The clouds aren’t a foot anymore,” she said.

“We were saved.”

She didn’t say anything. We got up. She folded the towels and put them in the bag while I shook out the blanket. We put the bags and the blanket in the back seat of her car and brushed the sand from our feet. We drove back to Route 114 and went south to the next beach highlighted on the map.

That beach wasn’t as pretty, the vista not as long, not a single space to stare and pretend escape into an ocean horizon, and the third beach wasn’t as pretty either, full of smelly shells with the slugs still inside, rotting on shore. We stayed there for an hour, fed a seagull some salted crackers, forcing the gull to move closer and closer with each cracker until his webbed feet practically touched the blanket.

We drove back to the hotel, went up to the room, came down from the room, went to a liquor store, bought two bottles of local wine, one chilled blush, one Merlot, drove back to the hotel, opened the bottles, took the two plastic glasses from the bathroom and went outside to one of the hotel’s piers. We sat on a bench and drank wine and watched the boats and the birds, the nicest a blue heron that skimmed the water, its large wings beating evenly. I wondered if it was easier to fly that way, if the air trapped between wing and water propelled the bird forward at a faster pace.

“It tastes sweet,” she said.

“Is that good?”

"It is good. I've broadened my taste in wines. The man at the wine store has tried to introduce me to blushes and Zinfandels. Do you like it?"

"The bottle says it tastes like strawberries. Why not? It's grape. Grapes are sweet."

"Some grapes are tart."

A motorboat started behind us. The engine revved, then killed. The engine revved again and a man stood tall behind the wheel and took the boat out.

"We should hijack it."

"We should," she said.

"We could ride away into the sunset."

"Like running away."

"Like that. Here. Give me your cup."

I filled her cup and filled mine and we drank. We drank the blush and we drank the Merlot. I held her close to me and we were drunk but not drunk enough.

"I can go back and get another bottle."

"Should we?"

"I can drive like this. I used to drive drunk all the time. I had a Camaro when I was a teenager and I'd get drunk and drive a hundred miles an hour when the highways were quiet."

"When were they quiet?"

"At three in the morning."

"What were you doing at three in the morning?"

"Getting out of the house."

"Can you drive now?"

"Watch me."

We walked to the hotel and got in the car and I drove straight. She didn't want to go back into the liquor store, so I did. I put the bottle on the counter and made a comment how we'd come back for more. The woman looked at me to see if my eyes were drunk, but I made them not drunk. I had a lot of practice looking in mirrors and making my eyes not look drunk when I was drunk. You had to do that when you were out with strangers. I paid for the bottle of Merlot, the wine heavier-looking, the bottle heavier in my hand than the blush had been, or at least it felt that way.

"How did it go?"

"No problem," I said.

We stopped at the local grocery and bought barbecue-flavor potato chips. We drove back to the hotel. There was no one on our dock so we walked back out and sat on the bench. When the third bottle of wine was empty the light had changed and the sun was low in the sky. She held my hand in her two hands and moved her fingers over my hand. She shook her foot every now and then. Her mouth moved like she was thinking, like she was about to say something but she didn't. She caught me looking at her and she smiled and then stopped smiling. She started to cry.

"Stop," I said.

"I know," she said.

We went out to dinner. She had pasta with vegetables, Pasta Provencal. I had mussels in a white broth. Some of the mussels hadn't opened all the way.

"These are bad," I said. "If they don't open all the way something's wrong with them."

"What can be wrong with them?"

"They're sick. You don't want to eat sick mussels."

"No, you don't."

I filled her glass of wine. It was an old-fashioned restaurant and our table was on an old-fashioned porch. The sky was darker than the city sky could ever be, the man-made lights so bright the stars disappeared over Manhattan. The waitress cleared our plates. We shared a dish of apple crisp and she had coffee and I looked into her eyes.

"You know I love you," I said

"You know I love you."

"I do."

"It's hard. It's going to be hard tomorrow."

"It's not tomorrow yet."

"You're good at just being in the moment."

"I pretend I am."

"That's something."

We left the restaurant and drove on Route 14 and it was very dark and there were no cars around and I wanted to go one hundred miles an hour, but the route curved and it was impossible. We went to the hotel room and got ready for bed like a real couple, brushing our teeth and getting under the covers, and by morning the covers were off the bed and the sunlight was pressing through the shades, pressing the day on us, the day to return to the city. Her husband was returning from his business trip. I'd told the woman I was seeing that I'd be back from my solitary beach trip. It wasn't right what we were doing. It was hurtful, or could be if the secret was found out. When she smiled or laughed or let me in her eyes it wasn't hurtful. It was like the first time. Like driving fast the first time when the speed takes over the worry of repercussions.

We went down to breakfast and we went to the beach and parked in the permit-only zone and then drove back to the city. I drove. The Long Island Expressway was too full of traffic and too narrow and I jockeyed in and out of the express lane, keeping an eye out for real cops in real cars. She kept switching music stations, waiting for the perfect song. She handed me water. She shelled pistachio nuts for me. We looked at the city from the Whitestone Bridge, skyscraper outlines blurred by smog, drove on the Hutchinson, on the Saw Mill Parkway. She pointed out the exit for Hastings on the Hudson and from there she told me how to get back to her house.

The puppy pug greeted us at the door and the cats rubbed against her legs. She checked her messages. Her husband hadn't called. Her daughter hadn't called. She was fine at camp somewhere in Massachusetts. We stood in the kitchen.

"Do you mind if I have a glass of wine?" she said.

"Go ahead if you need it."

"I'd like one."

"Then have one."

She opened the bottle of wine and I just stood there, in the middle of her tiled kitchen and the pug kept jumping on my leg, trying to lick my hand. I felt like a stranger in her house.

“Do you want some?”

“No,” I said.

“Do you want a beer?”

“No thanks.”

“It’s so easy for you to go,” she said.

“No. No it’s not. It seems easy for you. Your husband will return and it will be back to business as usual.”

“It’s not business as usual.”

“But it is. What if I wait here until your husband comes back? Until your kid comes back? What if I tell them we’ve been fucking for the last eight months? I’ll tell them it’s better to get the truth out. That it’s better than taking the easy way and lying, switching on and off.”

She wasn’t looking at me. She was looking into her glass.

“Could you handle that?” I said. “I can go crazy now. I can say it. I can tell them. Are you ready?”

“Are you?”

“You have more at stake. Are you ready?”

She drank some wine and looked into the glass. The pug started barking. He wanted attention, but I had none to give.

“You’re not,” I said.

“Stop.”

“You’re not. You’ll never leave him.”

“That would be a bad day. That would be a hurtful day.”

“Yes it would.”

“I feel so bad.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I feel bad every day,” she said.

She wasn’t ready and I hated that. I’d skimmed along so long I did it without trying. With her I wouldn’t have to skim. With her I’d never have to go out with strangers. She knew it. She knew I was ready and she knew she wasn’t and she knew it made me crazy. And her knowing it made me want to go crazy, all the way crazy, like drinking, but that didn’t count. I could go crazy but not all the way crazy and my train was going to leave in twenty minutes and it took ten minutes for her to drive me to the Hastings on the Hudson station. She knew what I was thinking. She put down the wine and took the car keys in her hand. The pug followed us down the stairs to the garage.

She drove me to the station. She parked. People were waiting on the platform.

“You’ll never be ready,” I said.

She didn’t say anything.

I told her to remember me. I told her I was going back to skimming. She still didn’t say anything. I leaned close and told her we could be forever. It was a wish. Something I said in her ear, low-voiced, like that would make it possible.

# A Little While Longer

*Scott Wiggerman*

*starting with a Dickinson line (#255)*

To die takes just a little while—they say it doesn’t hurt.  
Hurry up now, faster, faster—that way it doesn’t hurt.

With sharp toothpicks, the son jabs his father’s deadened legs.  
“I’m a voodoo doll,” jokes the man, “It’s OK, it doesn’t hurt.”

Cancer ward: the term’s enough to make a mother retch.  
A child of indeterminate sex whispers, “Stay. It doesn’t hurt.”

After the rush, you’ll forget about the needle in the vein.  
A simple means to an end—like an X-ray, it doesn’t hurt.

At their son’s confession, his parents stare in disbelief.  
Not a word about his AIDS, just “I’m gay, it *doesn’t* hurt.”

Knowing it’s worse to argue with him, she spreads her legs,  
closes her eyes and dreams for the day it doesn’t hurt.

Bullets for an enemy whose eyes and hearts cannot be seen.  
The soldier: “The end is but a breath away. It doesn’t hurt.”

“Now I lay me down to sleep,” a child repeats by rote.  
Pray he makes it through the night. Pray it doesn’t hurt.

# Decisions

*William Alton*

It will be the moment you remember your shoes before going out to walk on the gravel road.

The ditch is full of tall grass and stale water.

Evenings, the mosquitoes swarm the road and bite our arms and faces.

There is little traffic here, no one to pick us up and take us to town.

By the time we get there, the sun's been down an hour and the stores are all closed.

We stand on the corner of Main and Pacific and call our parents for a ride.

*What were you thinking?* They ask.

*We wanted to see how long it would take.*

Home again, beneath the trees with their leaves folded for the night, we stand on the porch and watch the stars travel from one end of the sky to the other.

Come midnight, it's cool enough to sleep so we retreat to our beds.

In the morning, we'll feed the pigs and chickens and fish the pond at the bottom of the hill.

Our mother will make lunch and we'll linger over the potato salad, waiting for the right moment to ask her for a cigarette.

Our father will shake his head.

*That's not a habit you want to start,* he'll say, but then he'll slide his pack across the table.

Tegan *Amelia Carley*



# Stealth Bomber

*Paula Schonauer*

We were at the Red Cup, a restored bungalow converted into a coffee house, painted lime green with a big red cup on the roof. It was an old hippy hangout, a bastion for beleaguered liberals needing a respite from Oklahoma style conservatism. She chose the place because she thought I'd be more accepted there, fewer stares.

They were playing PJ Harvey on the stereo, her defiant, sneering song, Rid of Me. I tapped my feet to the beat while she had her face in a mirror, applying lipstick, rouge and powder. I enjoyed my Ethiopian blend coffee, straight up black, while watching the eclectic, eccentric people: an old Rastafarian with dreadlocks reading in a corner, a couple of skinny gay guys (they had to be gay) sharing a brownie and talking about art, and some old school hippy dudes sitting at the counter sharing conspiracy theories, debating the healing properties of ionized water.

I looked around the coffee shop, the artwork on the walls, all the pieces portraying different artistic interpretations of a simple red cup: abstract, expressionistic, impressionistic, realistic, primitive.

“I’m going stealth,” she said, smacking her lips. She twisted a lipstick tube, replaced the cap. She put it back inside her red butterfly brocade purse, flourishing her French nails.

“That’s a personal choice,” I replied.

“The only choice, so far as I’m concerned. I don’t know how you do it, out and open like you are. You take too many risks; you’re going to get hurt.”

“I think secrets are riskier. Someone always finds out. You can’t construct a whole new past. It’s not healthy, psychologically, I mean. Plus, with everything computerized... you can’t hide things anymore. Just be yourself.”

She puckered her lips, looked down her nose. I saw the scar at the top of her forehead, not quite healed, not quite concealed with makeup.

“How’s your new hairline? Does it hurt?”

The red in her cheeks deepened, and her eyes widened. She glanced around to make sure nobody overheard, leaning toward me, a growl in her voice.

“Just because you can’t afford to get your face done...”

She sat up, adjusted her posture, looking down at her breasts bulging beneath her sleek, satin blouse, a slight, smug smile on her face. She took a drink of coffee, careful to display her effete little pinky. When she swallowed, I saw the scar on her throat, barely noticeable, but since I knew what to look for, it was easy to spot.

“And that tracheal shave... how was that?”

She looked stricken, self conscious, chin-to-chest to hide her throat. “Why are you picking on me?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

But maybe I did. She’s always giving me shit about how big I am, how butch I look, telling me I’ve wasted my time transitioning, but I don’t think there’s only one way to be a woman. There’s lots of women who like to wear jeans and t-shirts, ball caps and sneakers, women who wear little or no makeup, women who hate pantyhose. I’m one of them.

“So, if you’re going deep stealth, does that mean you’re moving away?”

She frowned. “Yes, it does. I have too much history here.”

“Where to?”

“I’m thinking about Seattle or San Francisco, Canada. I don’t know. Someplace where it’s easier to meet... you know... someone.”

I recognized the loneliness in her voice, the disappointment, the hope. I realized I’m afraid for her, afraid she’ll get hurt, emotionally, physically. She’s been clinging to a fantasy, some 1950’s Donna Reed version of womanhood: the homemaker, the husband, the kids. I don’t think it works that way, not anymore. Maybe it never had.

She used the mirror in her powder compact to check her hair, flashing it around her head, teasing out

several strands, tamping down others. After a groan, she got up, walked across the floor to the restrooms. She looked confused when she encountered the doors, impatient while she waited, distressed when a man walked out of one restroom as another walked out of the other.

While I waited for her to finish primping, I went to the counter to ask for a refill. The waitperson was an illustrated girl, two whole sleeves of tattoos: Celtic swirls, butterflies and peacock fronds. Her horn-rimmed glasses magnified her beautiful blue eyes. She smiled at me.

“Yes, can I help you, ma’am?”

I offered my cup, and she took it from my hand.

“Ethiopian, right?”

She remembered the kind of coffee I’d been drinking. I was so impressed I didn’t complain when she told me they charged extra for refills, and I tipped her a dollar just because she was nice and looked so cool.

“I love your tattoos,” I said.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

She might’ve looked like a hell raiser, but she was so polite. I put yet another dollar in the tip jar, walked back to my table, gingerly carrying my full cup of coffee. When I got back to my seat, one of those skinny gay guys pulled out the chair, waited for me to sit down. I liked his smile, his bright white teeth and meticulous blond hair, almost a short bob. He wore hip-hugging jeans and a half-sleeve blouse with lace on the ends.

When she returned to the table, her lips looked thin, stormy eyes flashing anger. After all the time she’d spent messing with it, her hair didn’t look any different, no better, no worse.

“I hate unisex restrooms,” she said. “Some creep left the toilet seat up. You’d think people might be more considerate.”

“I like unisex restrooms, they’re easier.”

“That’s because you don’t pass. If you’d make just a little more effort, if you cared more about how you look...”

I cradled the coffee cup in my hands, letting the porcelain warm my fingers. It was a soothing thing, something to keep me calm.

“I want to leave,” she said.

I raised my cup to my lips, took a sip. “I’m not finished.”

She sat down, frowning at the two gay guys. “Why does everyone want to be androgynous? Men and women are different, and I say viva la difference.”

She checked her lipstick yet again, unbuttoned and rebuttoned the top of her blouse. She placed her hands on the table, examined her nails, straightened her skirt and tightened the ankle straps on her high heels.

When I swallowed my last little bit of coffee, I stood up. “Okay, I’m ready to go.”

She nudged me out the door, and we stepped into the fresh air of early spring. The stuffiness of winter was beginning to fade, the decay replaced by new life. I saw a robin perched on the branch of a budding maple tree, baring its orange breast.

“Birds are funny,” I said. “The males are the pretty ones, the colorful ones, while the females are so bland in comparison.”

“I’m not bland,” she muttered.

“And you’re not female,” I said, surprising myself. “You might be a woman, but you’ll never be female.”

She slapped me, nails dragging across my left cheek.

“I’m just saying, no matter what you do to your body, you’ll never be female. When you die, when they dig up your bones a thousand years from now, they’ll look at your pelvis, notice how narrow it is. They’ll wonder why a man was buried in a grave with a woman’s name. At some point, your truth will come out, sooner or later.”

She walked to her car, unlocked the door.

“I’m getting cremated,” she said, climbing inside the car.

She shut the door and drove away, leaving me standing there, forgetting we had arrived together.

## (Unrhymed) Rondeau: Bundle of Twigs

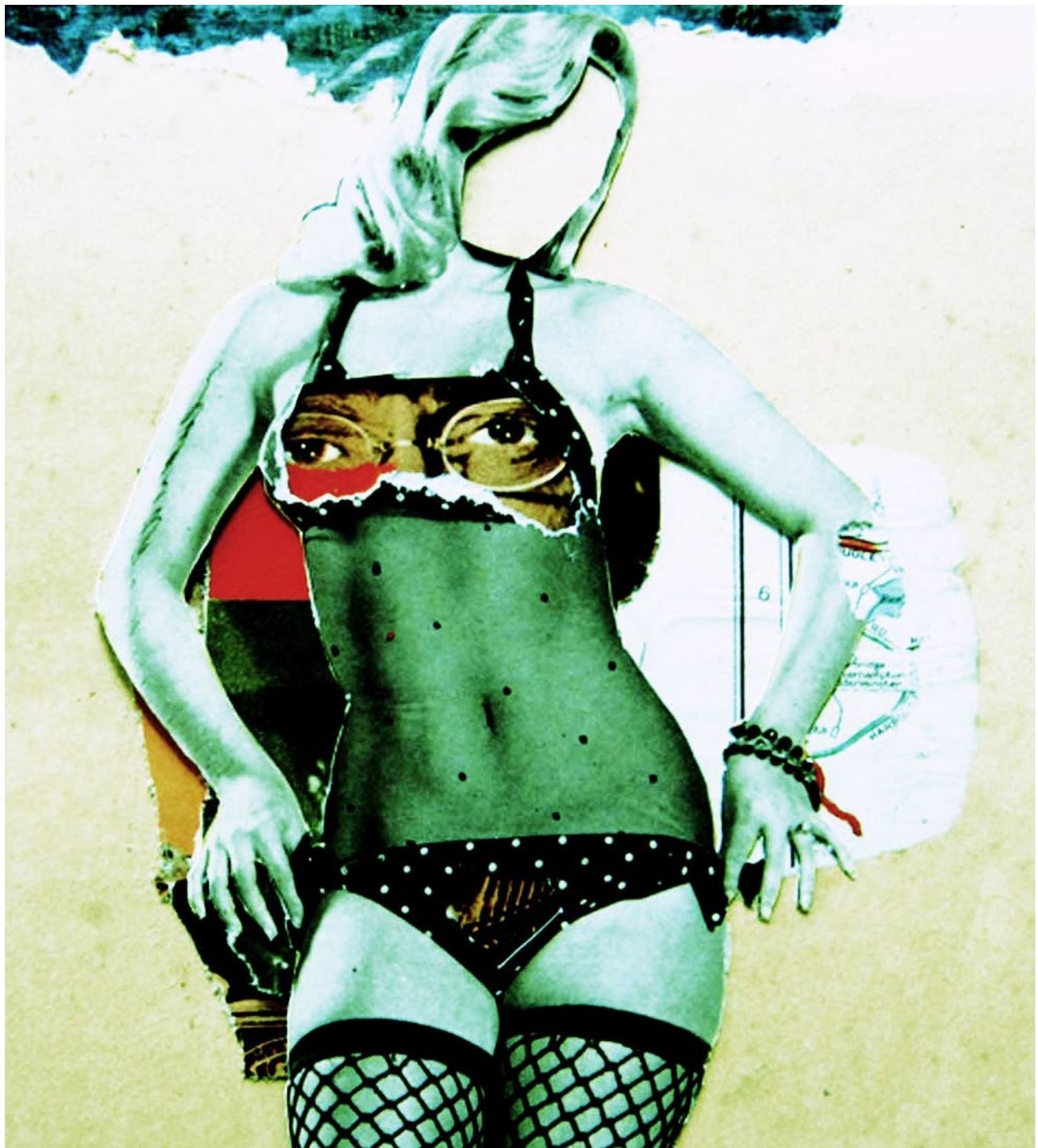
*Kenny Fame*

Thick slabs of meat that has become  
spoiled, long before its sell by date.  
Gay Puerto Rican teen was killed.  
Nineteen years old & dismembered  
burned to death--decapitated.

Arms, legs & head had been ripped off  
before, his body was dumped. His  
remains were found near his home town.  
Thick slabs of meat.

This grotesque crime was made worse by  
the response of community  
leaders, with cornrowed tongues; and po-  
lice who placed blame on the: target-  
ed, deboned, deveined--imagine  
thick slabs of meat.

Eyestrain *Susan Wicker*



Mattel

*Connie A. Lopez-Hood*

Please

a pretty suicide:

a pink gun

a doll that shits

a kitchenette

with running water

or else

a silk ribbon

a line of Comet

a flask of Clorox

fun for all ages™

# Beside the Live Creek Flowing

*Brandon O'Neil*

Publish my name and hang up my picture as that of the tenderest lover. . .

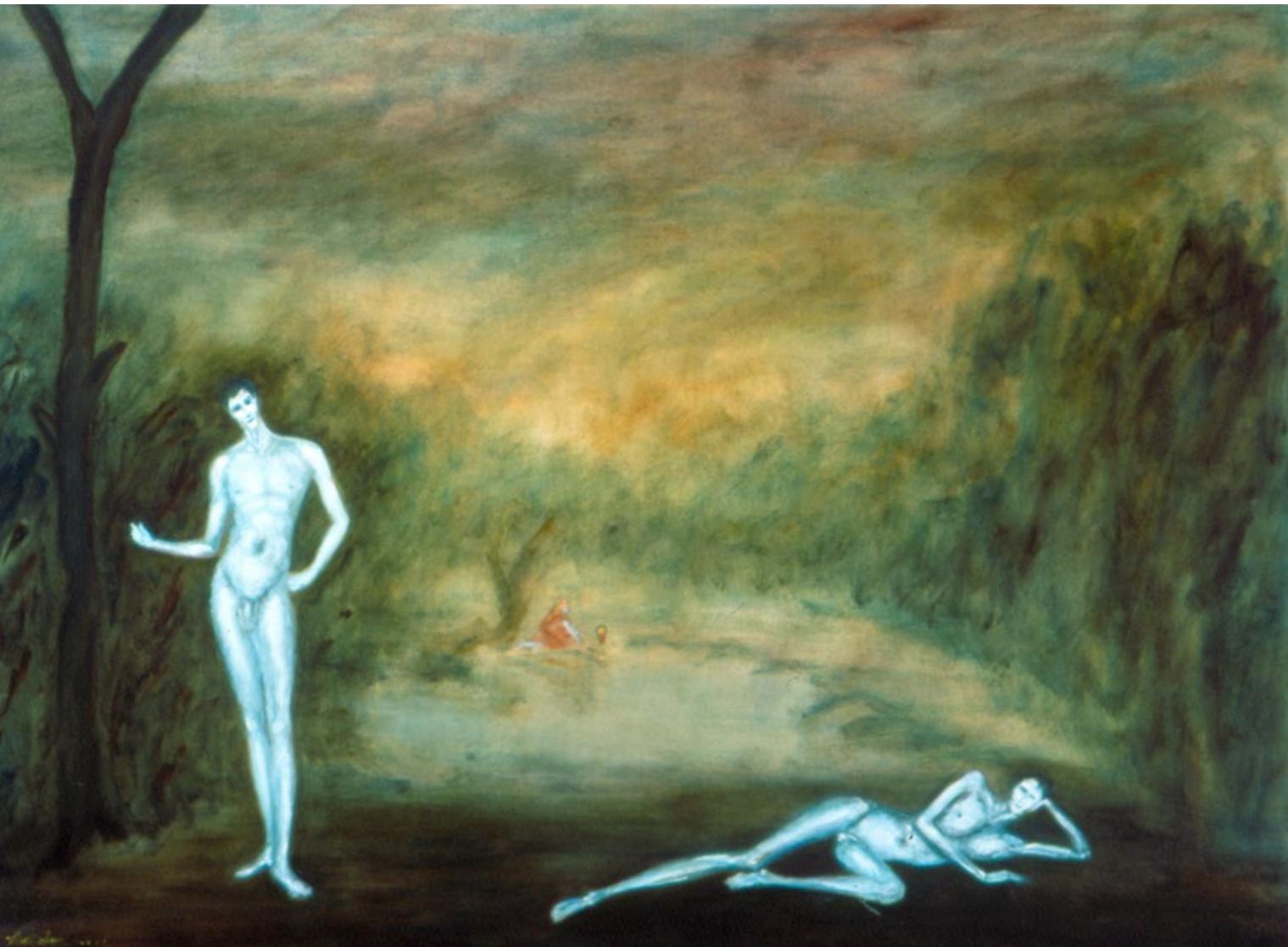
Whose happiest days were far away through fields, in woods, on hills,  
he and another wandering hand in hand, they twain apart from other men. . .

- Walt Whitman

Yes, 'happiest days;' I've known my share. Oddly enough, Walt was there, too. Walt and I weren't alone, mind you, there was Robbie. There was *always* Robbie. Walt, Rob, the continually rolling creek, our favourite shade tree; ingredients for sheer bliss! I've heard the Buddhists talk about a magical place called Shambhala, where streams of honey flow and nothing foul can enter its gates. I've never been to Shambhala, but I'd put money on there being a little spot along the Paint Creek in Rochester which would rival it.

I had just started writing poetry when Robbie moved back to Michigan after having been living in Mississippi for a few years. He was an inch or so taller than myself, with very English

Pond *Matthew Felix Sun*



features, and that slight tilt of the skull that makes one seem so constantly inquisitive. He brought with him a charm and a smile that gave new inspiration to my verse. Almost overnight, I went from practically puritanical subjects to yearning, love-aching poems. Robbie's response to my affection at first was one of humble refusal. Though he was thrilled at times to be the recipient of my childish fancy, he made it quite clear that he had other interests. Once in a while, though, he would surprise me with a walk in the woods or through the copses near the Paint Creek. It was there, in the woodlands, that I began reading Walt Whitman.

I am not really sure how I was first introduced to his poetry, but I knew that Walt must have felt many of the same things I was feeling for Rob. There in our woody escape, Rob would allow me to rest my head on his shoulder as he leaned against a tree and read passages from *Leaves of Grass* to me. His favourites were the war poems in the chapter called *Drum Taps*, which he would read with his strongest, most animated voice. I usually forced him to read a few from *Calamus*, because it was there that I saw us so clearly reflected. Even when I read those poems today, I hear the creek and the chirping birds, smell the sap of the evergreens, and for a brief, delirious moment, I can almost feel the warmth of his body next to mine.

“Close your eyes, I’m going to steal something,” he told me once, interrupting a recitation of a favourite poem. Of course I obliged. My eyes opened to find his lips resting on mine, his left hand on my neck, and his right around my waist. At first, I pretended to resist his kiss; but he saw right through me and held me tighter. *Leaves of Grass* slid silently out of my hands, landing on the soft grass cushion beneath us. My first kiss! And Walt was there! It lasted for what seemed like an eternity, but not an eternity like when you are waiting at the DMV for the sassy attendant to call your number. No, it was an eternity like when it seems the earth quits revolving, when there is no such thing as time, and you can’t be bothered with trivial things like the hands on a clock.

My mind can conjure up that moment in a single second and take me there beside the creek, beside Rob, the book on the grass, the look in his eye. I can still see us together; my head on his shoulder, his arm around me as I read, he gently touching his lips to my temple, his nose inhaling the scent of my hair. And yet as soon as I see him, I am reminded of what came shortly afterward: Rob quit calling, he quit reading poems, and I walked alone.

Eventually, Robbie went off to college and I was left alone to wander the banks of the creek, *Leaves of Grass* under arm, and Walt Whitman trying desperately to fill Rob’s place. His mother had picked out a college for him; a private, Christian college, founded upon “good old” reformed-Presbyterian values. When he returned on break after his first year, I was greeted by a completely different person. I had to beg to spend time with him. And on the rare occasion he graced me with his presence, there was no poetry, no arm around my waist, and no lips on my temple.

The last time I saw him, I was notified that he felt nothing but contempt for me, and that he traded in his poetry for less emotional pursuits. I pleaded with him: “How can you hate me? What have I done?” “It’s not what you’ve *done*, it’s what you *are*.” Those words cut through me like a rapier. “And what exactly am I, Rob?” I could barely spit out the words. “You know what you are. Don’t make me say it.” He turned away from me and stared at the ground. For the first time in our acquaintance, Robbie hid his emotions from me. For the first time in my life, I caused someone to be ashamed. Perhaps I was even ashamed myself. I reached out to grab his hand and his fingers tightened into a fist as he glanced up at me with a face of hatred, fear, and maybe even a bit of sadness. “You better go before I make you leave,” he said through gritted teeth. I nodded as a single tear ran down my cheek. I brushed it away and turned around to leave. Silly me, I half expected him to come running after me, spouting apologies and begging me not to leave. I gave up the expectation when I reached the front door of my own home.

I hear he is in the Coast Guard now, and travels all over the continental U.S. ensuring our national security. Sometimes when people don’t think I’m listening, I hear them whisper that he’s been married, that she’s the prettiest little woman, a good Christian, a home-maker. His mother is so proud, expecting a grandchild in the next year. And as I turn away and pretend that I didn’t hear it, that single tear rolls down my cheek again.

# Babydoll and Spatula

*Wendy McCutchen*

If you peel back pink plastic  
diminutive countertops;  
peered beneath Barbie's rubber  
cheeks & eyeballs monstrous big,  
You'd find a special sort of neurotoxin.  
A hazard less detectable than BPA's  
this danger is soft

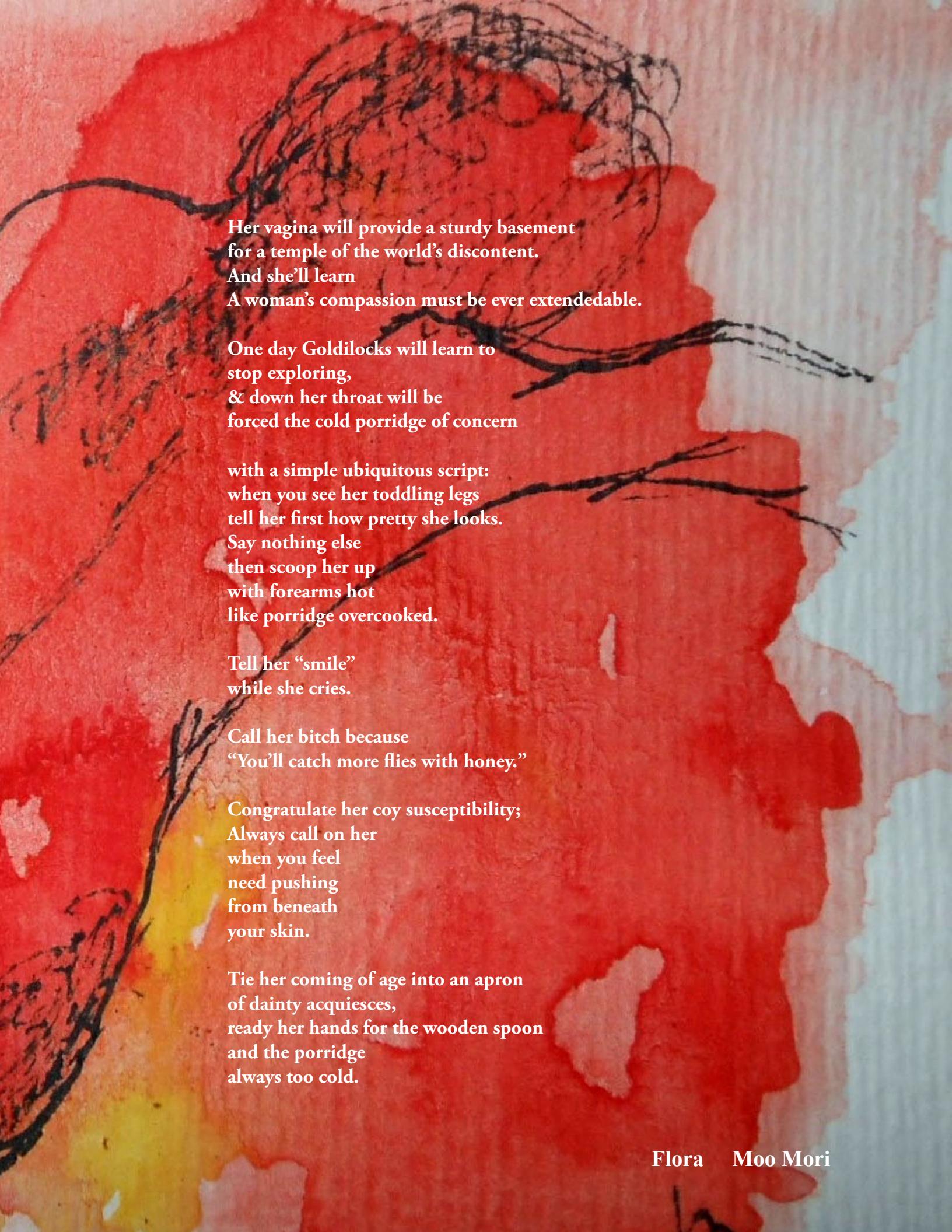
heavy  
it's the reason mama bear's bed  
is always too soft.

As Goldilocks' body melts into puberty  
her bed will grow softer too,  
because a woman's bed is  
bruised into being  
soft  
enough  
to welcome in  
the whole of humanity's  
guilt in need of healing.

The same motion  
that fills her golden bosom  
with baby doll & spatula  
leaves her brother's arms  
empty for functions of destruction  
and braced for scars  
to be wept over in private.

Goldilocks, shoulders now  
wet with tears entitled & uninvited,  
learns to keep her dried-up eyes  
always open to  
the burden of absolute nurture.

Her muscles ache from that  
old habit of reflexively bearing  
witness



Her vagina will provide a sturdy basement  
for a temple of the world's discontent.  
And she'll learn  
A woman's compassion must be ever extendedable.

One day Goldilocks will learn to  
stop exploring,  
& down her throat will be  
forced the cold porridge of concern

with a simple ubiquitous script:  
when you see her toddling legs  
tell her first how pretty she looks.  
Say nothing else  
then scoop her up  
with forearms hot  
like porridge overcooked.

Tell her "smile"  
while she cries.

Call her bitch because  
"You'll catch more flies with honey."

Congratulate her coy susceptibility;  
Always call on her  
when you feel  
need pushing  
from beneath  
your skin.

Tie her coming of age into an apron  
of dainty acquiesces,  
ready her hands for the wooden spoon  
and the porridge  
always too cold.

# Fortune

## *Nathan Alling Long*

Allie tugged the letter free from the mail slot, but the crease remained. Half good news, half bad, Allie figured—which, considering it was a letter from Dad, would be better than usual.

Allie tore the envelope open and read Dad's large, wiry scrawl. He had just won a 2012 Jeep through some sweepstakes and had to pick it up on August 1, in Washington. Could he stop by and say hello on his drive back to Wisconsin? Enclosed was a copy of the winning letter.

Allie's dad, it seemed, was on a roll and Allie decided to give him another chance.

\*\*\*\*\*

When Allie's dad called from the sweepstakes hotel, they agreed to dinner the next night at six.

"We can have something simple," Allie said over the phone. "Maybe Chinese."

"Oh, you cook Chinese?" Dad asked.

"I meant take out," Allie said, recalling that the wok was propping up the hot water heater in the basement. "You've never seen my place, have you, Dad?"

"I guess not. You own it?"

"For the last seven years. It's not much, but it's mine."

"Huh. Well, you've got to see this Jeep, Allie. It's gold and has quadraphonic sound. A beauty."

\*\*\*\*\*

Allie's Dad arrived at six thirty. Allie first peered out through a window, wondering if maybe it was better not to let him in. But when Dad knocked again, long and hard, as though he were begging to see his only child, Allie decided to open the door. They hugged for a moment, though they had never hugged before.

"Come look at the jeep," Dad said before Allie could invite him in. "The top folds down and everything. They even gave me a hundred dollar gas card. How about that?"

"That's something," Allie said, as they walked to the curb. "It's shinny. Very gold." It struck Allie then that the Jeep was probably the most expensive thing Dad had ever owned.

They stared at the Jeep a while. Allie's car, a used grey Honda Civic, was parked right behind, but Allie didn't point it out.

"Want to see the house?" Allie finally asked.

"You mentioned Chinese," Dad said then.

"Right. Well, we could walk to the restaurant, get take out, and eat it here."

"Sounds great," Allie's dad said. "But let's drive. You've got to experience this thing: the wind, sitting up so high."

On the drive, Allie's dad didn't ask about Allie's life, and Allie sensed there was not much new in Dad's life—besides the Jeep. Allie knew Dad saw this car as a swell of good fortune, and like any true gambler, he was fixated on riding this wave, on staying with it. Allie remembered as a child being swept up into the highs of Dad's winning streaks. Allie wondered then how long the Jeep would stay in his hands.

At the restaurant, Allie's Dad said, "You order," and slipped into the men's room when it was time to pay. Allie knew all Dad had to offer was the ride, and himself.

As they left the restaurant, Dad started talking about the new car smell, how the Chinese food might overtake the scent. "Do you mind if we walk back?" he asked. "I'll get the Jeep later."

"Sure," said Allie.

"I'd just hate for sauce to leak onto the upholstery," Dad said, locking up the Jeep. "Whenever I'd look at that stain, I'd think of you."

Allie smiled, but felt punched. They headed back to the house, Allie walking in front. It was always this way: when Dad's good luck ended, he took Allie down with him.

At the house, Allie climbed the stairs, but Dad stayed by the gate. "You know," he said, "maybe we can wait on the food and walk back to the car. I just don't know if I trust this neighborhood with that brand new Jeep."

"As you wish," Allie said, gripping tight the plastic bag of food. "Just knock when you're back."

They didn't hug, but Allie's Dad came up and took a fortune cookie from the bag. "For the road," he said, then walked off back to the restaurant.

Allie went inside to watch TV and eat noodles. On the way to the couch, Allie threw out the other cookie, already knowing what the good fortune was: Dad was not coming back.

# Pipedreams for the Evergreen

## *Crisanda Benson-Davis*

I don't usually write poems about nature  
but when I was leaving your apartment  
everything was so covered in snow  
and I walked underneath this evergreen  
that had its top half cut off and I felt like  
I was looking under a girl's skirt when I walked  
beneath its hooped boughs. I'm only telling you this  
because you have been watching the icicle  
outside of your window form for days in the endless  
thawing and freezing cycle that is February. You even  
pulled the blinds aside last night to look at its progress.  
I told you, half joking, that after you fell asleep  
I would open the window and snap the icicle off  
and use it to stab you in your sleep. And no one would be any  
the wiser because the murder weapon would just melt away.  
I read that in a book, once, in high school, and it stuck with me.  
That, and, the idea that heaven smells differently for everyone  
depending on what your favorite smells are. The smells of my heaven  
change every few years, I guess, at least, some of them do.  
Some of them stay the same. I guess it also changes with the seasons  
because my mother wears two kinds of cologne; one in the fall and winter  
and another in the spring and summer. Rapture is her summer cologne.  
It was summer when I met you and we walked through a field  
of fog one night. God. Fog. What else is there to say?  
I love the idea of heaven on earth (everything smelling like  
sunblock, amaretto, and lit matches), of walking through a field  
in the clouds and coming out, coming down, completely soaked  
with the night sky. There was a desolate, smudged feeling  
on the streets that night. That shake and bump of driving  
over the railroad tracks, and the stolen minutes of furious  
kissing while waiting for the train to pass, the red lights  
blinking across your pale skin, almost washing you right out  
of the car. There was one night I didn't feel  
like kissing you and looked out the open window and saw  
the enormous stationary grain silos, crowned  
with an American flag and the freight train roaring  
clumsily beneath. That's why I never write poems  
about nature. I can't. All I really know is what  
never to tell you about, to save them for nights  
when the sky turns a violent rust soaked pink  
and I can't sleep because I don't want to miss  
the coming thunderstorm. I wait as long  
as I can before closing your windows and even then  
I keep watching, but it's somehow not the same.

# Your New Place, 2 or 4 a.m.

*Kaitlyn Duling*

Feeling for a light switch in the bathroom you share  
with her, thick darkness couches around my old sleep;

I can't find anything. What I expect to be half-broken  
fixtures are dripping water on the edges of the room

some distance from what used to be my body  
before I came inside. If you could put your hand

around my lost hand like you do, push it towards a pull  
chord or dimmer. Instead, my fingers shuffle along the cracking

wallpaper and my temples squeeze into this dark  
upon dark, watch it slide into the tub you told me lives here.

Dark squares itself silent and peace-faced, unwinds  
me around around. Love, there's no light in this place at all

and I need to wash my hands, need again the curve of my back  
against yours, her or her asleep somewhere close to a window

cracked open. Even the air can hardly breathe, the linoleum feels  
unpatterned in my non-looks through doorways, eye shuffles,

feet bottoms; what we've done,  
what we haven't done and how the floor just lies with itself

there somewhere under all of it. Nearby, in the morning lit  
room where you sleep, a coat-rack steadies its shaking arms

and some imaginary lamps you haven't yet bought  
hang limply from their solid eaves. In the bathroom, I stumble

on nothing and it all darks harder. I remember something about a window  
but still; just dark sink dark sink dark.

Light My Way 1 *Rene Capone*



# Summer of the Jell-O Wrestler

*Erin Grauel*

I'm lying on a blue and white striped sheet in the sand. Waves are breaking in slow soft drifts a few yards from me, and the sun shines warm on my face. I look to my left and Shelley is there smiling. A breeze pushes strands of her ocean-curled hair over one eye. She laces her arm around mine. I smile.

I wake in the fetal position with a stomach ache. My mouth is glued shut with its own scum, and the room smells like a backed up toilet in a smoky bar. I groan and roll over to see Casey's bare, too-tanned back. Her crunchy over-gelled curls fall by her shoulders next to a faded butterfly tattoo. She is breathing heavily, almost snoring. I roll the other way and see a half-empty beer from the night before. A cigarette butt floats in it. I have to pee. I try to get up slowly so as not to wake Casey. She groans a bit as I step out of bed but does not open her eyes. I scan the floor for my clothes. Nope, no underwear or bra anywhere to be found, but I find my jeans and one of Casey's T-shirts which hangs loose after I slip it over my head. I put on my flip-flops. This is a house with a lot of roaches.

I open the bathroom door and am barely able to stifle a gag. The avocado colored toilet is full to the brim with shit, toilet paper, and piss. Casey warned me last night, when I was too drunk to care, that the toilet was broken. Sometimes they have to turn on the washing machine to make the water drain out of it. I walk through the kitchen and out the front door. It's 7:30 in the morning and already hot. The buzzing cicadas make the air pulse; humidity swirls around my damp face. I stumble down the porch's two rickety steps and walk through overgrown grass to the bushes. I'm horrible at outdoor peeing, always managing to pee on my pants as I struggle to a squat position, so I take them completely off. My desperation for relief has trumped my usually reserved nature, and I don't even bother to look around to check if anyone can see me. The only sounds are the cicadas and an occasional mocking bird screech or a woodpecker tap tap tapping on a tree. The house is surrounded by a pine forest and the closest neighbor is miles away. How did I end up way out here, pants-less and pissing in front of a thirty-year-old trailer?

When I'm done peeing a wave of nausea surges through me and I double over in the bushes to throw up. Too many shots last night. A wasp circles my head and grass pokes at my legs. I really hope Casey or her butch hog farmer roommate doesn't come outside and find me, with my bare ass in the air, puking in the bushes. I'm supposed to be the one judging them, not the other way around. They live in a dilapidated trailer. They have thick Southern accents and terrible tattoos. They rarely read, and they own every single one of Tyler Perry's movies for God's sake. I am better than this.

I step back inside, careful to breathe through my mouth as I tip-toe into the bedroom where Casey is still sleeping. I remember us dancing to a bass thumping hip hop song at the bar last night. I cringe at the memory of my spastic dancing, like the tin man before he was oiled, or maybe the tin man with just a little too much oil. She made me sit down when I stepped on her toes. We laughed about it. I guess we had a fun time. Now I get to search for my underwear. My bra is draped across the headboard, and my underwear is on the floor beside Casey's nightstand. I find my T-shirt crumpled on the floor of Casey's doorless closet. With a vague attempt at stealth I wriggle into my clothes at the foot of the bed. As I lift my keys from the dresser Casey opens her eyes.

"Hey, Girl," she croaks, her voice thick with sleep.

"Hey, Case. I have to go to work," I whisper. "Thanks for taking me to the bar last night. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Oh, okay, babe. See you later." I see her reach over to grab the cigarette pack on her nightstand.

I have to stop my car and throw up again as I am pulling out of her yard.

I resist the urge make needless glances at my phone for text messages that don't exist as I make the winding forty-five minute drive away from Casey's trailer in the country, back toward my parent's house near the beach. I want to see Shelley's name pop up, though it hasn't for two weeks. Halfway home my phone lets out its familiar beep, the one that used to make my heart jump because I knew it would be Shelley. It's Casey. "Be careful driving home." I set the phone back in the cup holder, trying not to feel pathetic, trying to be happy that at least someone is concerned for me. Even if it's the wrong person. Someone I have nothing in common with. It doesn't even occur to me that I can be happy with just myself. That it doesn't matter who is, or is not, chasing me. I am still dumb about how love and

relationships are supposed to work. I am dumb as to how to like someone without throwing every piece of me into the fray. I'm making up the rules as I go along.

I have affection for Casey, but if we're being honest I'm just using her to distract me from the girl I actually want. I'm sure Casey is aware of this. When I'm with Casey I catch myself comparing her to Shelley in my head and I have to force myself to stop. To not care that Casey doesn't read and Shelley does. Or that Casey listens to Insane Clown Posse and top 40 radio, while Shelley listens to indie rock and our iTunes accounts are practically identical. Or that Casey cares nothing for politics and, on the religion front, turns out to be blindly devoted to Jesus. Shelley and I have the wariness of religion that's usual of people of our sexual orientation and age, and we get animated discussing political matters that affect us. Shelley and I have thought about things. The same things. This is not to say Casey is bad; I've never met someone more honest or unpretentious. But she's just not Shelley.

I tell myself to let Shelley go. I try to convince myself she was just a post break-up rebound girl, and that she isn't that important to me. I replay the situation in my head. The situation is this: I move to New Orleans from South Carolina with my girlfriend of three years, Kristen, a girl I'm not really in love with anymore. After nine months in New Orleans, I break up with Kristen, yet continue to live with her, because it's easier, because we're still best friends, because I can just wait until our lease is up to move out, because I am a codependent idiot. Then Kristen, whom I'm still living with, starts to sleep with our neighbor. Our neighbor is Shelley. I like Shelley. We flirt constantly. I find out about Kristen and Shelley and decide to move back home to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I am not sure if I will come back to New Orleans. I'm not thinking that far ahead. I reveal to Shelley that I like her the night before I leave. It's her birthday, we are both drunk, and we stay up all night talking, holding hands. Shelley says she likes me over Kristen. Says she'll come visit me at the beach. I get in the car after staying up all night and drive the twelve hours home texting with Shelley the whole way. These are dangerous times.

Shelley flies to see me a few weeks later. She stays for a whole week. Kristen knows. Kristen texts Shelley while she's with me. I don't know why it doesn't occur to me to be angry or worried about this. There is a problem among lesbian women when they break up with each other. Most of them try to remain friends. This sometimes works out okay, but in many cases it just leads to these twisted co-dependent relationships where the broken-up couple refers to each other as "best friends" while ordering each other around, and getting upset when one person tries to move on with life. So I wasn't worried about Kristen, even though she had a thing with Shelley. Kristen was my friend. Her thing with Shelley wasn't a relationship, right? Right?

While she is with me Shelley and I spend our days swimming, lying in the sun listening to music, and laughing. At night we go to bars with my friends, who do not hesitate to tell me, whenever Shelley leaves for the bathroom, that she is beautiful, charming, and funny. Before she leaves to go back to New Orleans, Shelley promises to wait for me. Then she returns home to Kristen and stops talking to me. I can't really blame her for this. Or, at least, I won't let myself blame her. Kristen is very persuasive, after all. And Shelley just got out of a long relationship herself. She probably just wants to have fun this summer. Still, I get hurt.

I tell myself that I'm okay. That I can do better. That I can find someone who will like me and only me. A girl who won't involve me in love triangles and soap opera scenarios. I am above that sort of thing. But these are just things I am telling myself. I am caught up in Shelley and I hope focusing on Casey will untangle me a little. Casey with her trucker mud-flap-girl tattoos on each clavicle. One with a halo and one with devil horns. Casey, whose obsessive roommate/landlord is in love with her, thus explaining why she does not pay rent (though I would think the shit-filled toilet would be reason enough not to pay rent). Casey with bi-polar disorder and the abused childhood. Casey who Jell-O-wrestled competitively for years in order to pay for her car insurance. Casey with the learning disability that makes it extremely difficult for her to read or write. Casey, who told me all of this in a flurry of information overload within the first few hours of my meeting her.

If Shelley met Casey, she would make fun of her right away. I can imagine us meeting her in a bar together. Casey would walk up to us, completely confident despite the fact that people like us think she shouldn't be. Her dress would be too short and tight for her large frame, and she would have glitter eye makeup on. She would hit on me first because my short hair would make her think I am butch, and she likes butch girls. She likes to be the one and only femme in a relationship. Shelley would stand beside me trying not to laugh as Casey told us about Jell-O-wrestling or the time she hit a girl in the head with a bottle "because she was being a trick-ass ho." Shelley is not a rude person, though. She would listen to Casey talk, maybe even ask her a question or two to seem interested. But as soon as Casey moved on, she would nudge me and pull me away to a corner so we could laugh about the

encounter. Casey would not care though. Casey does not care what anyone thinks of her. And most of all that's what makes us different. Shelley and I are trying to be liked, trying to be normal, trying to be cool. Casey is just Casey. And she'll hit you in the head with a bottle if you think otherwise.

Lesbians in Myrtle Beach are few and far between, especially compared to New Orleans. I was introduced to Casey through a mutual friend, Tim, who worked with her. He said, "I have the perfect girl for you."

I said, "What makes her perfect?"

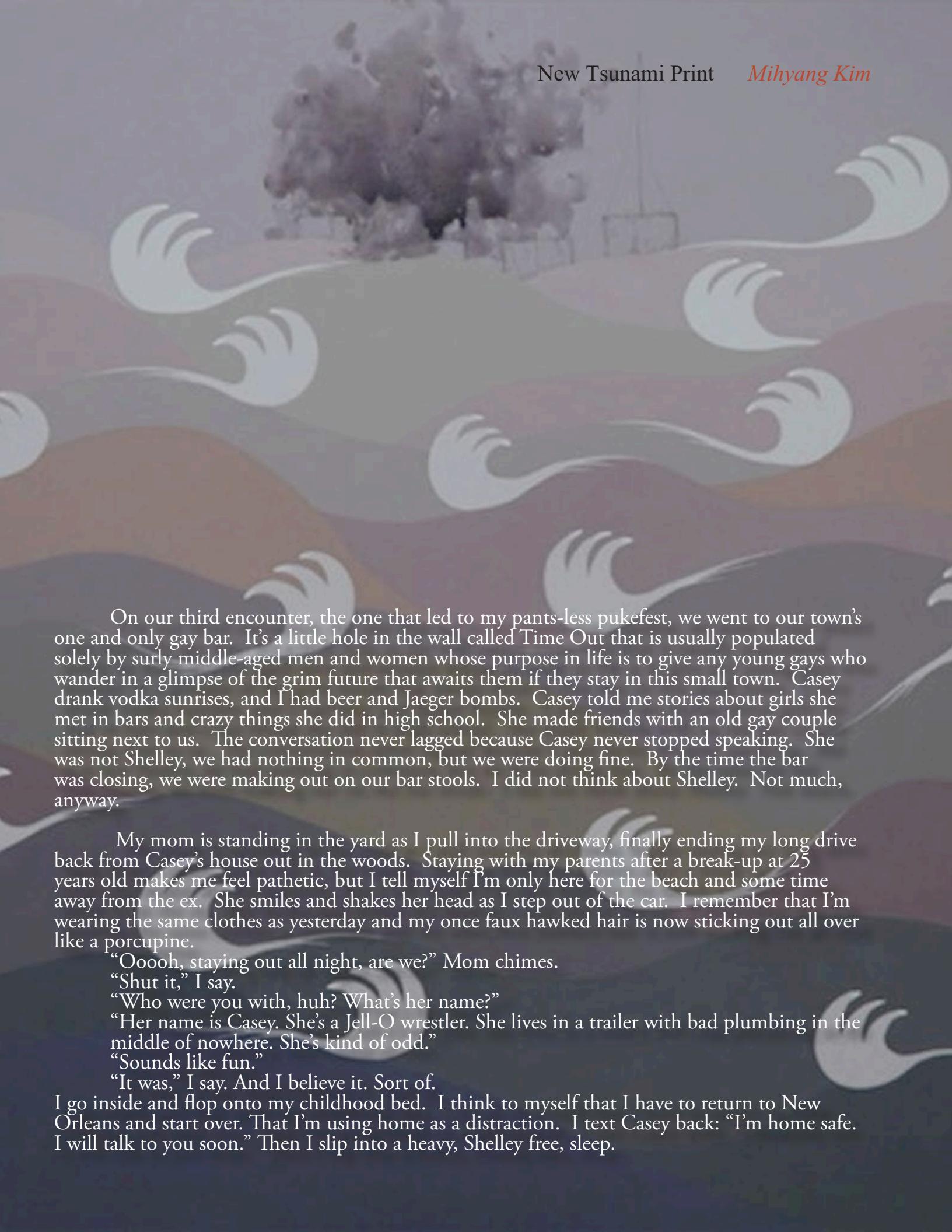
Tim said, "She's gay. And crazy. But in a fun way."

And that was it. The only requirement. A vagina and a predilection for dating other people with vaginas. Oh, and being crazy in a good way.

Tim gave Casey my phone number, and she met me at a bar one night and bought me a drink. I was nervous about meeting her because from the little information Tim was able to give me about her; one of the key points was that she was from Fayetteville, North Carolina. Fayetteville is a military town (Home of Fort Bragg army base) about two or three hours northwest from Myrtle Beach. It has a Wal-Mart, three Waffle Houses, and a Tire Plant. Fayetteville churns out rough necks, and because it is close to the beach, I had met plenty of those people in my life. They pile into their cars on weekends, packing in as many people as will fit, then cram themselves into cheap motel rooms in the seedier parts of town, sleeping three or four to a bed (in my teen years, a love of free beer had enticed me to crash a Fayettevillian hotel party or two). Once, in the bathroom of a bar, I was confronted by a group of large linebacker-looking girls. As I walked up to the sink to wash my hands, they asked me what county I was reppin'. My meek, no-eye-contact reply of "um, this one" sent them all into hysterics. "She wouldn't last a second in Cumberland County," the biggest linebacker said as they exited, leaving me feeling confused and dumb with my wet hands still dangling over the sink.

When Casey came in to the bar she was wearing a dress that she called her "no-no" dress, and three-inch black heels. It certainly made me think *no, no* when I saw it. It was a black tube-top dress that came up so high on her thighs I was constantly scared of being exposed to her "no-no" areas. But Casey thought she looked hot, and I guess that's all that matters when choosing an outfit. I certainly would not have been comfortable. I was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and flip-flops. But if that's what she liked then I was willing to overlook a tube-top dress up to her waist. For a night anyway. Upon first seeing her, I knew I would not ever want to talk to her again after that evening. But then we ended up talking until the bar closed. Or more accurately, Casey talked until the bar closed. She told me her life story, and I listened while drinking beer after beer. As crazy as the things she was telling me were—"Yeah, I once broke a girl's arm while Jell-O-wrestling." "Salsa really burns to wrestle in, I'll never do that one again, coleslaw was okay though." —I was fascinated. I kept picturing her sliding across a ring full of Jell-O in full attack mode, lunging violently at any poor girl who decided to engage in a gelatinous battle with her. I could barely imagine what it was like to wrestle another person seriously, let alone what it would be like to wrestle another person while covered in lime-green Jell-O, with a drunken crowd cheering in the background. Even if I had absolutely nothing in common with this girl, she could at least entertain me. That was something. As we parted in the parking lot, Casey said, "Well, I guess I'll see you around, girl." And I, drunk, able to feel connected to anyone at that moment, said, "Yeah, definitely, we should hang out again."

Casey and I went to the beach together a few days later. She wore a white bikini top that was two sizes too small, long-board shorts, and some sort of glitter lotion. I learned more about her. As a child she played only with boys and would make them do weird things like put their penises in holes she dug into the ground. When I asked her why, she answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world: "Cuz! Boys are dumb; they'll do anything." Her dad couldn't handle her hyperactivity and learning disabilities and often kicked her out of the house when she was a teenager. Once he hit her; she hit back; he had her arrested. After high school she got engaged to an army guy who had PTSD and couldn't hold a job. She moved to California with him but left when he cheated on her. She told me I was quiet and asked if I was afraid of her. I told her I was a little bit afraid of her breaking my arm or something. She laughed and said she wouldn't do that to a girl she likes. As we sat in our beach chairs watching the sun go down, drinking cold beer, she smiled and said hello to anyone who walked past. She got into genuine conversations with a few people who strolled by about their sun-tanned, tow-headed children and how cute they were. The ocean reflected the light blue sky which grayed as the sun dipped to the horizon. The clouds streaked across the scene in orange, pink, and red. It was a beautiful evening, and I couldn't help but think that it would be even more beautiful if it was Shelley sitting next to me.



On our third encounter, the one that led to my pants-less pukefest, we went to our town's one and only gay bar. It's a little hole in the wall called Time Out that is usually populated solely by surly middle-aged men and women whose purpose in life is to give any young gays who wander in a glimpse of the grim future that awaits them if they stay in this small town. Casey drank vodka sunrises, and I had beer and Jaeger bombs. Casey told me stories about girls she met in bars and crazy things she did in high school. She made friends with an old gay couple sitting next to us. The conversation never lagged because Casey never stopped speaking. She was not Shelley, we had nothing in common, but we were doing fine. By the time the bar was closing, we were making out on our bar stools. I did not think about Shelley. Not much, anyway.

My mom is standing in the yard as I pull into the driveway, finally ending my long drive back from Casey's house out in the woods. Staying with my parents after a break-up at 25 years old makes me feel pathetic, but I tell myself I'm only here for the beach and some time away from the ex. She smiles and shakes her head as I step out of the car. I remember that I'm wearing the same clothes as yesterday and my once faux hawked hair is now sticking out all over like a porcupine.

"Ooooh, staying out all night, are we?" Mom chimes.

"Shut it," I say.

"Who were you with, huh? What's her name?"

"Her name is Casey. She's a Jell-O wrestler. She lives in a trailer with bad plumbing in the middle of nowhere. She's kind of odd."

"Sounds like fun."

"It was," I say. And I believe it. Sort of.

I go inside and flop onto my childhood bed. I think to myself that I have to return to New Orleans and start over. That I'm using home as a distraction. I text Casey back: "I'm home safe. I will talk to you soon." Then I slip into a heavy, Shelley free, sleep.



A Boy Named Wind

*Rene Capone*

# how to get over

*T'ai Freedom Ford*

your walk is a beautiful  
tattletale. a big-mouthed  
bitch with whispery rumor  
on her breath snitching  
on your every step.

ugly it up with swag  
and butch til it becomes  
a butchered two-step,  
an abandoned stagger:  
lifeless line of straight.

your walk is a beautiful  
bowl of sugar. brown  
and crystalline. a slow  
melt on the tongue.

bitter that shit  
with dead cigarette butts.  
gather your spit til it  
dissolves all remnant of sweet.

your walk is a beautiful  
threat. bomb. lit fuse strut.  
a live wire spitting spark.

what else is there to do  
but detonate? send flamboyant  
limbs flying everywhichway.

your walk is a beautiful  
battlefield. a loaded sashay  
of sway and muscled thigh

declare war. unload the artillery  
of switch. shrapnel their eyes  
with bitch and fierce. drop dead,

gorgeous.

\*On June 5, 2012, Kardin Ulysse, a 14-year-old middle schooler was jumped by four boys in the lunchroom and called a  *fucking faggot, transvestite, and gay*. Beaten so badly, Kardin can no longer see out of his right eye.

# Reconstruction

*Nathan Alling Long*

The couple bought a large old row house at the edge of a good neighborhood for a song. It was structurally sound, though of course it needed work. But they were young, in love, and excited to make the house their own. They bought power tools, they watched “This Old House,” they brought home fabric swatches and samples of tile. With the right make-over, they were sure to make it beautiful again.

In late October, a month after they settlement, they began working on the kitchen. They were tearing down the back wall to make a small addition when they found the remains, a skeleton wrapped in a dress, wearing a wig and hat. All the tiny bones of the feet were preserved in nylon stockings. All the finger bones were gathered in thin leather gloves. The flesh was all but gone.

The police came quickly, followed by reporters. The kitchen was cordoned off, men in latex gloves placed tiny samples in plastic bags. And for a moment, the house was full of flash bulb light. Then the remains were taken away, and all grew quiet and dark.

The next day’s paper reported that the body was from the forties—when nylons were still new. The skull had been crushed in by a blunt object; this was likely the cause of death. It wasn’t until the morning edition that the rest of the story was released: the body was a man’s.

The couple had stayed in a hotel, refusing to return. They felt nothing now could return their house to beauty.

And in the city morgue, before sealing the remains, the coroner held a tibia in her arms, imaging the man’s strength, simply to walk down streets, to shop for stockings.

# Roadkill

*Jennifer Caloyer*

They won't give him a bra. Or underwear. Or lipstick.

He is slowly being erased.

"You gonna let me fuck you tonight?"

"Kind of him to ask," Jaime thinks. Even though it's a rhetorical question.

The small cell is shared with Joe, a behemoth of a cellmate. With tattooed arms and legs and neck and face, he could have been the strong man in the circus had he chosen a different career path.

The building is surrounded by five barbed-wire fences, four ID checkpoints, two guard towers, and a 50,000-volt electric fence. A guard explained the ropes when Jaime entered the facility two weeks ago, face still bloodied.

The cuts are crusted over now, and a more subdued color, like merlot. Or that lipstick, French Love, Jaime used to save for nights when he wanted to look more sophisticated.

His mother used to tell him,

"In French, your name means, I love you." When men made love to him and called out his name, he translated their breathy voices as saying, I love you, I love you. Although they rarely did.

The prison lies halfway between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, in a desert where people only ever pass by, always on their way to somewhere more interesting. Nothing but shades of brown. Shit brown. Bile brown. Mucous brown. Dirt brown. In the summer, the heat makes one feel like melting, and in the winter, the wind whips up between the mountains and gets caught there, streaming back and forth like a ferocious game of ping-pong.

Jaime refuses to look at himself in the mirror, hasn't seen his own image since he got there. But he can feel his greasy hair slick back on its own. He pictures his wigs lined up on their mannequin heads at home. He named them: Marilyn, Joan, Rita. Sitting proudly like busts of famous composers on a piano.

Since entering prison, his body has started to change, morph into what it once was, what it should never have been. The hair is sprouting back on his face. He is becoming angrier. His voice is descending downward a half note each day. At least he still has his breasts.

"Inmate number 47384902, the doctor will see you now."

The doors of his cage unlock.

Amos straightens his nametag before two guards bring the diminutive man to him. Amos nods at the men, who stay just on the other side of the door, peering through the shatter-proof glass window. He rifles through a pile of files and extracts Jaime Rodriguez's.

"You've been waiting a while to see the doctor."

"Yes, it is you I've been waiting for." Jaime turns his left lip upward in a flirtatious gesture he used to use in bars, but here, it falls flat.

"I have a few questions for you. I see you've filed a complaint about your hormones. Were you receiving physician-prescribed hormones before the time of incarceration?" Amos feels comfortable with big words. He has spent over sixteen years reading through the prison library.

"My hormones I received on the black market, from a guy who knew a girl who knew a doctor. So, yes, technically, they came from a real doctor. But I never met him."

"Aha."

Jaime has a hard time reading the doctor, this man in blue scrubs with chiseled features and a cleft in his chin one could get lost in.

Both men notice a cockroach moving across the floor robotically.

“They used to only come only at night. But lately, they’ve been getting brave.” Amos’s pencil scratches across medical forms like a dancer performing soft-shoe.

He doesn’t reveal that he’s not a doctor, not even a certified nurse, but rather, inmate number 43759218, who’s been here long enough to have developed a career cleaning wounds and taking notes and vital signs. He works helping Doctor Nobel four times a week and does one shift as a wannabe EMT, riding in ambulances to highway accidents, administering first aid or sealing up body bags. He had earned everyone’s trust, getting rides from an armed guard to the hospital, where he’d sit with real medical professionals, waiting for disaster to strike on the highway.

“Give me your left arm.”

Jaime obliges. Amos takes his arm and begins stroking the area where his ulna meets his humerus, as Jaime’s mother used to do when he was a child. She was a nurse and had understood the working mechanisms of the body, but not why her son hated his so much.

“That feels good.”

Amos recoils. “I’m trying to find a vein.”

“I think I have none.”

“They’re just not pronounced. Look at mine.” Amos pulls up his sleeve to reveal bulging veins the size of telephone cords. “It all depends on what God gives you.”

Jaime has little faith in God. God accidentally gave him a penis.

He watches as Amos pierces his skin with a small needle attached to a long, clear tube. The blood flows out and is caught in a vial with a pink, rubber seal. Jail is all about fluids going in and out, in and out like the ocean tides.

A third man enters the room wearing a white coat.

“I’m Doctor Nobel. I see you’ve met Amos, our ‘helper.’”

Amos cringes at the word and hands the doctor Jaime’s file. Prison negotiates power. Who has it. Who wants it. What you’re willing to do to get it. Amos rubs elbows with medical professionals but is still locked behind bars at night. He only ever has a few minutes to play doctor before his true status is revealed.

The doctor closes the file and turns to Jaime.

“This is where the problem lies. Because you weren’t officially receiving hormones from a doctor, we can’t diagnose you with Gender Identity Disorder, and you need that diagnosis in order to receive hormone medication in here.”

“But I am not a man,” Jaime wants to scream. Instead he stays silent. Complacency is something he’s always excelled at.

Then: “What if I’d had the surgery already?”

Jamie wants to know what life could have been like in prison as a woman.

Amos’s eyes widen. Could the man in front of him really possess female genitals?

“Then I’d have no choice but to give you the hormones. Have you had the surgery?”

This was the question du jour. The one Jaime someday hoped to answer, Yes! When a few of his friends from Nocturne, the bar where he danced, had the surgery, it was as though they formed their own club and left Jaime on the outside. He referred to them as the clit clique.

Jaime shakes his head. “I will be sure and get that done before my next arrest, I promise.”

Amos cracks a half-smile.

The doctor checks Jaime’s chart. “Manslaughter is no laughing matter.” He puts the folder back in the pile, a signal to the guards on the other side of the window to return.

“Let us know if you need anything.” Amos has heard doctors speak using the royal we.



from *Variations on the Human Figure*

*Ivan de Monbrison*

Because of his good behavior, Jamie is allowed to join the prison work force. He had been selected for the sewing department, his hands a perfect fit for the nimble job of ripping out "Made in Honduras" labels attached to clothing and sewing on labels which read, "Made in the U.S.A." He keeps his head down while he works. He doesn't talk to the other men. But they talk to him:

"Bet those hands of yours would work nice down my pants."

"Later, we're gonna get you, pretty boy. You won't be so pretty anymore."

Jaime makes \$5.75 an hour hunched over his sewing machine. But he won't get his earnings until he's released. He is saving up for the operation. He will need to rip 382,000 labels to pay for the surgery. These labels have a freedom he no longer possesses. They will be sewn to shirts and folded on store shelves. They will be fingered by other human beings. They will have the sun fade their colors while Jaime sits behind bars, rotting. Testosterone gathering in his body like drunks on the Vegas strip.

After he gets the surgery, it will take only a week to recover before emerging like a butterfly from a chrysalis. She will re-enter the world as Glenda Rodriguez: good witch of the North. She will fall in love with a strong man who will take good care of her and buy her a house with a sturdy dishwasher.

Jaime is jolted out of his reverie when a power ballad blasts over the radio loudspeaker. He looks around. The big bald guy with the dragon tattoo is singing along. Jaime laughs just as this man looks up from his performance. Later, he will come up to Jaime when the foreman steps outside for a smoke and hold a knife to his neck. He will tell him if he ever shows his teeth again he will slit him ear to ear. The next day, Jamie's hands will tremble so badly, he will find it nearly impossible to remove "Made in Honduras" labels for the first hour.

"They got you pretty bad."

Amos stitches up Jaime's left eye and then rubs alcohol on it. He dabs an elongated cotton swab across the swollen, bloodied and blue flesh.

"It's just skin. It will heal."

Jamie looks up at the guards who are standing on the other side of the door. He recognizes one of them from when he was first admitted to jail. The man had ordered a strip search, supposedly to check for drugs and weapons, but judging by the amount of time Jamie had to linger with his pants down, he was sure this man just wanted to satisfy his own curiosity of what lay between his legs. After all, when he was apprehended, he was wearing fishnets, red heels, a filled-out bustier and French Love.

"You have nice hands," Amos hears himself say without thinking. He could lose his position if he blurs the lines between patient and "helper." But being close to being released gives him confidence.

Jamie turns his palms downward and examines his hands as though for the first time.

"My mother wanted always for me to learn the piano."

"Did you?"

"Where would I practice? I didn't know anyone who owned a piano."

Two cockroaches turn dizzily in circles, making faint clicking noises as though trying to locate one another on the floor.

"They look confused."

"It's the Cypermerthrin. They're putting it through the vents to kill the bugs. It makes them disoriented. I have something for you. But you gotta be cool. Those guards might be watching, so just stay where you are. I'm going to bend down like I dropped something. You do the same and I'll give it to you that way."

Jamie's heart beats faster as he leans forward and his cheek comes across Amos's prickly stubble.

"Now," he mouths and flashes a piece of red fabric through the cuff of his sleeve, which Jaime grabs and tucks into his own cuff. The two men sit up straight and glance towards the guards, who are

distracted, talking to one another.

“We have our own black market here. Stuff isn’t easy to come by. But I saw these and thought of you. Let me know if you like them.”

“When can I see you again?”

Before Amos answers, the doctor comes in to check on his work.

“Who did this to you?” the doctor asks. Amos knows the victim never speaks out or else the next time will be ten times worse. Staying silent, Jaime looks at the linoleum floor, where he counts the drips of blood that have fallen from his face.

“I’m ordering an administrative segregation.”

“What does this mean?”

Jaime feels as though he has been segregated his entire life. How will this be any different?

“No work. No recreation. You’ll basically be in isolation until this passes.”

What is this that will pass? His time in prison? His yearning to occupy a woman’s body?

Jaime makes a feeble sound of protest.

“It’s that, or I could reassign you to a psychiatric prison.”

Jaime’s cheeks warm. “There’s nothing wrong with my mind.”

Amos wipes the blood from the ground with a rag.

“Of course not,” says the doctor, condescendingly. “I’m just letting you know your options.”

“Segregation, por favor,” Jaime says, as though he’s ordering coffee at the local diner.

The doctor scratches his pen across a page in Jaime’s file.

“Come back in a week. Amos will remove those stitches.”

Amos peels off the rubber gloves. Barriers lie between workers and prisoners, latex and bodily fluid. But behind bars, in the dark, fluids co-mingle without apprehension.

The first thing Jaime does in isolation is take the red fabric from his cuff. It’s women’s lace underwear. Jamie wonders what else Amos can get. How did he pay for this? He quickly takes off his jumpsuit and boxer briefs and places his ankles through the openings of the panties. After steadying himself, he bends forward and guides the soft fabric over his calves, knees, thighs until they rest on his square hips, digging slightly into his skin. Jaime takes a moment to revel in the flirtatious lace before slipping on his jumpsuit, proud of the secret concealed underneath.

At first, isolation seems like a spa getaway. Jaime can sleep at night without worrying about a visit from Joe. He can have a bowel movement in private. He can dance in his cell without apprehension, singing Dusty Springfield in his head, imagining he is wearing a bright yellow boa around his neck.

But then the loneliness settles in. He wonders if he really would rather be with those monster-like men just for some company. The guards come and go so quickly: to do a check a few times a day, to drop off food. He tries to lure them to stay by asking easy questions,

“What’s the weather like outside?”

“What’s going on in the news?”

But they don’t bite.

Even the bugs and rodents steer clear of isolation.

For one hour, once a day he’s taken out to “the yard,” a twenty-by-ten foot plot of concrete where he can see for himself what the weather is like. Excruciating heat. Well over one hundred degrees. It makes him sweat, and he feels pustules form on his face and back. What he wouldn’t give for an exfoliating bath. Everything that touches his skin in prison is harsh and calloused. Softness doesn’t exist here. Even the mashed potatoes are grainy. He suns himself, like a dog.

The only other time he's allowed to leave is to take a shower, every other day. A guard escorts him down the halls to the main prison, where he is led past men who spit and jeer. He has made sure to remove the underwear and hide it in his bed sheets. One misstep could cost him his life.

Today, the only free showers are at the back of the room, the light above flickering a few times before going out. Maintenance checks are not a priority here. Jaime doesn't want to see his body anyway, just wants to quickly go through the motions with the soap, "cleaning every crevice," as his mom used to remind him. The water is coarse and smells like minerals.

When he feels a cool body approach, he keeps his head down, resigned to his fate, too tired to fight. Amos takes Jaime's head and gently turns it towards him. Amos moves his body closer until his flesh is flush with Jamie's wet skin, quickly arousing both men. In this moment, Jaime doesn't care if he's caught. In this moment, he doesn't care if his throat is slit by a jealous onlooker. It's worth this euphoric escape.

Amos reaches his hand down between Jamie's legs. Jaime doesn't want him to feel his erect penis, this member he's not supposed to have. He leads Amos's hands instead up to his own breasts, nipples erect. Amos makes a faint moaning sound. Jamie catches a glimpse of the moldy grout in the tiles ahead of him and then looks to the floor where a drowned cockroach is caught in a counterclockwise undertow of the shower's draining system, spinning like a cyclone.

Back in isolation, Jaime will begin to refuse first food and then water. After six days the door will finally unlatch and he will be taken to the prison clinic. Amos will no longer work there. He will have been released after sixteen years behind bars because he's served his time for shoplifting a six-pack of beer, his third strike in a string of more serious crimes: grand theft auto. Battery. A new helper will hook Jaime up to bags of clear fluid. This attendee will have trouble locating a vein and leave him bruised and blue, a color his body is getting used to. This new attendee won't talk to him, just watch as the bag empties into his body. And Jamie will picture Amos waiting for him outside the prison gates.

They had been bored when they got the call, cruising the stretch of highway that spanned between Ghost Town and Pahrump. The driver flipped the switch, sending the lights atop the ambulance into a dizzy swirl of red and white, and the deafening siren sounded. Amos, sitting in the back with the equipment, where prisoner volunteers had to stay, braced himself.

It was a seven-car collision. Witnesses later said they had seen a red car veering in and out of lanes. Most likely a drunk driver. It took a while for enough help to arrive. A medicopter was called: it would eventually land in the desert, whipping up its own wind over spiny succulents. People on their way to Las Vegas would complain about the bumper-to-bumper traffic keeping them from the big jackpot, and tourists on their way home, broke and hung over would wish they never had taken the trip.

"Next time, we'll fly," many would say.

Two medics unlocked the latch and released Amos from the back of the ambulance, flares in hand. Then the driver and the medic sitting in the passenger seat followed. They separated, approaching three different cars. The other four automobiles would have to wait for more help to arrive. Amos activated the flares and placed them diagonally across the road, cutting the highway's girth down from four lanes to just one. When there were enough medics to help, his job would be traffic controller, waving cars forward, keeping lookie-loos from halting the flow of traffic.

He was sent to check on the red Corolla. Before Amos reached the car, he stared out into the dark, open desert. He could use this moment, these other people's misfortunes, as an opportunity to

disappear. Refuse to do his last few months. But the sight of the car, halfway down an embankment, hood bent in angular directions, like a larger version of a recycled soda can crushed by bare hands, reminded him he was needed here.

Shining a light into the car, he assessed there was only one victim. A woman, slumped over the steering wheel. Carefully, Amos pried open the door. Up ahead, he could hear the clanking metal of the Jaws of Life being used to remove a body or two from an overturned car.

“Ma’am, I’m here to help.” He was met with silence. He snapped the latex gloves out of his back pants pocket and put them on. He wasn’t authorized to lift bodies, but this seemed like a do-or-die situation. As he shifted the woman, he heard the rattle of glass. A bottle of vodka rolled onto the carpeted flooring of the car. A red high heel was missing. She still had a pulse, and he gently moved her so that her back rested on the seat. Her face was bloodied, clashing with the color of her bright lipstick. A wig, long and auburn, rested slightly askew on her head, revealing short, dark hair beneath.

Amos removed the small, plastic barrier from his pocket, used to help administer CPR, without allowing any germs to cross over into his own mouth. He breathed life into the woman and watched as her chest swelled while he silently counted — her breasts rising and then falling. Amos drowned out the shouts from outside and focused only on breath in, one-one hundred, two-one-hundred, three-one-hundred, and then the involuntary exhale.

Once she could breathe on her own, he picked up her purse from the floor on the passenger’s side, hoping to find some form of identification or any medical indication he should know about. He rifled through makeup and square packaging containing condoms until he came across her wallet. He removed the plastic card from inside that showed, not a woman, but a slight and serious man, Esteban Jaime Rodriguez.

He wondered how Mr. Rodriguez would react to his wife’s accident. Where was she going alone so late at night? Why had she been drinking? Luckily he wouldn’t have to be the one to inform him.

“That an open bottle?”

More EMTs had arrived on the scene.

“Better get the cops on this one. Don’t touch anything. Except the lady.”

“Can I get a stretcher over here?” Two medics scurried forward and helped him transfer the woman with torn fishnets to the metal platform. In Roman times, emperors rode around on essentially the same mechanism.

Police investigated the crime scene. She was the only one with open containers of alcohol in her vehicle. When she became stable, she would blow air into a breathalyzer and come up with a blood count of .10%. She would be read her rights and taken to the women’s prison facility eighty miles away. But the next day she would be transferred to the men’s.

Amos restocked the used linens in the ambulance. He cleaned his CPR aid with disinfectant. He checked the levels of oxygen in the tanks and placed the date, in pencil, on a hanging green card hanging off of the silo. He took in what it felt like to be in fresh air, away from vertical bars.

Body bags passed him and entered adjacent medical vehicles.

On the ride home he morphed back into a prisoner. Only the landscape stayed consistent. People were ever-changing. He looked out the window at the surrounding mountains, firmly planted like a “sleeping lady,” the EMT’s would always say. But Amos only ever saw a man, calloused and tired, broken and worn.

# Double-Triolet: But Father Jose Told Me Not To Tell

*Kenny Fame*

He asked if I was feeling weak.

Thin ruffly shaped ribbons, of peeled  
up potato-skins, at his feet.

He asked if I was feeling weak.

Red and white, like a stop sign. He  
saw me painted, in fear. Hands kill.

He, asked if I, was feeling, weak  
Thin, ruffly shaped, ribbons, of peeled

flesh. Afternoons. Everyday. See  
day after day, we'd meet. Book's shut.  
pants down. Door's locked. Tea-kettle seeped;  
flesh. Afternoons. Everyday. See

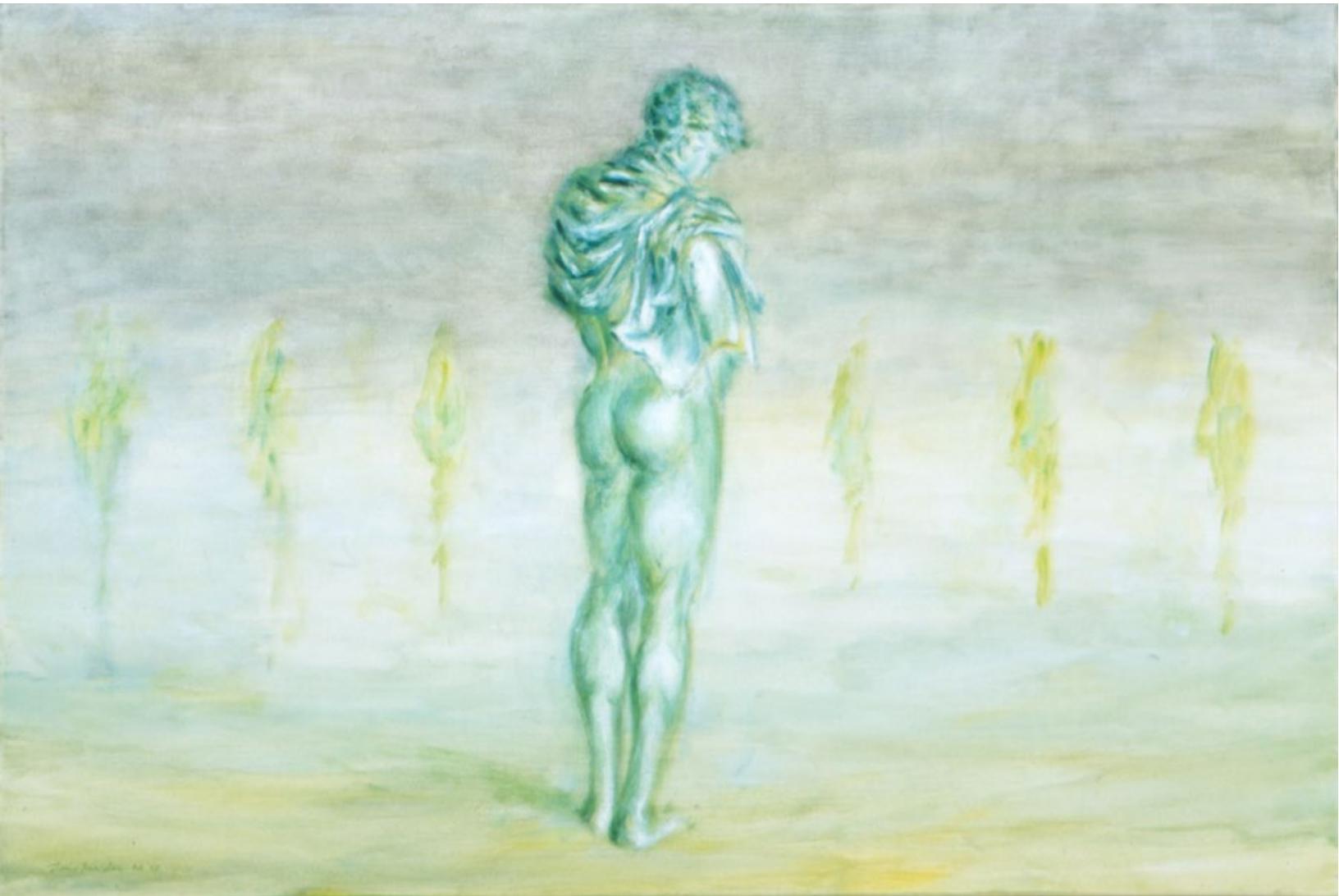
Picasso faces; Blue Peri-  
od, set in Cubism form. Crushed  
flesh. Afternoon's. Everyday. See  
day after day, we'd meet. Book's shut.

# hungry

*Connie A Lopez-Hood*

i liked how he touched me like we were brothers & we were brothers but then  
his hands grew big & he only wanted to hold a football & i was too skinny & he  
kicked books out of my hand & dolls out of my bag & i told mom & she said  
*he was only playing* & she said *you take things too serious* & she said that i needed  
to eat but she didn't know that i had my fill when he rubbed my face in the dirt  
held me down my laces out

Pilgrim *Matthew Felix Sun*



y

*Changming Yuan*

yes, yes, with your  
yellowish skin, you enjoy  
meditating within the shape of  
a wishbone, inside the broken wing  
of an oriental bird strayed, or  
in a larger sense, you look like  
the surfacing tail of a pacific whale  
who yells low, but whose voice reaches afar  
far beyond a whole continent, to a remote village  
near the yellow river, where you used to sunbathe  
rice stems, reed leaves, cotton skeletons  
with a fork made of a single horn-shaped twig  
when you were a barefooted country boy  
on the other side of this new world

is this the reason for your obsession with the letter?

# 8 Erotic Poems

*Callum Angus*

## I.

there are mornings  
where your skin out-rivals  
the split papaya  
the sun through the blinds lights  
your shoulders, the backs of your legs  
a rosy pale made for holding,  
bathing, sinking teeth into

## II.

sometimes we fuck  
slow slide, pressure of a moment.  
blunt and holy.  
the moment when you  
breach the rigid muscles of my asshole  
that welcome you inside.  
as if to say, “oh there you are,  
we heard you knocking but had to turn the kettle off before leaving the kitchen  
to answer,  
but please, enter now,  
ravish us with your marvelous hardness,  
forgive us for forgetting how you fill us so completely.”

## III.

the first time you said my name while i was giving you head  
was the first time anyone had said my name while i gave them head.  
our words

take part in our love making,  
become lovers too.  
talk of desires on the outskirts  
of what we learned was decent.  
talk seeps into elbow corners  
fields of collar bones and swales of hips  
praised by lips alert with vowels,  
tongues that tread the edge  
of aural.

your words for me  
cull sensitivity from grab-bag body parts  
your mouth invites me in to live inside your throat  
set up home next to your uvula  
where i am daily called by words  
both sweet and unfamiliar  
in their sweetness.

#### IV.

i once wrote a prophecy.  
i wrote that i wanted to be called a good boy  
with someone else's come on my face.  
it has been fulfilled far sooner than foretold,  
now i see  
what comes after prophets

#### V.

each morning that i wake up with you  
with our butts touching  
i can't remember what it's like to not

have our butts touch.

## VI.

feels like earth  
burying my nose behind your balls  
you thick inside my throat  
feels like singing to a strangler fig tree  
on what it's like to be growing  
rooted in the ground at one with musk  
so overwhelming it consumes and  
reverts to commonplace

i want to be drowned in your scent  
every morning before breakfast  
and then just before sleeping  
to step outside and feel your nature  
slip inside of mine.  
to bring you down to leaflitter  
on a caterpillar's knees  
where warm forest air turns solid  
and i stop and fuck you  
until we too can claim  
our beech bark carving

## VII.

it doesn't get any sexier than driving north through new england  
towing our torn jeans and tacky rental car  
through the high fashion penny loafer-ed truck stops and  
and white pine wind breaks  
in october.

there are seersucker remnants of harvard boys  
now with old deflated dicks  
who could have done this sojourn at least once  
without getting distracted by sucking cock.  
delicious ivy league cock,  
veined and bobbing above argyle socks  
shucked on the court for tennis rackets  
and rugburn.

seven cups of luke warm coffee traded up  
for hundreds of miles of mothwing foliage  
just so i can hold your hand across the console  
and think of all the road head given over these yellow lines  
which hopefully isn't that much cause that shit's more dangerous than texting  
but nice to think about  
and if you drool in your sleep  
i'll silently thank the rental company  
that it's not my leather your bodily fluids are staining  
only my sheets and my teeth.

### VIII.

your perineum drops me with vertigo  
from its supple swell  
teasing with the subtlety of cantaloupe  
waiting to be tasted  
a robust flavor with a tang of sweat.  
i will go willingly under these tides  
to drown in your heat along my back

# Beautiful

*Isaiah Vianese*

Your pants are fucking my shirt,  
their sleeves and legs entangled on the bedroom floor,  
and my red jockstrap is stuffed inside your boxers.

Our many socks are mismatched and kissing,  
an orgy of cotton and polyester,  
my clothes and yours wrapped into each other,  
making one mass of sweaters and sweatpants,  
my jeans with the copper buttons holding  
your favorite blue hoody.

I like to think they are breathing there,  
comfortable and cuddling.

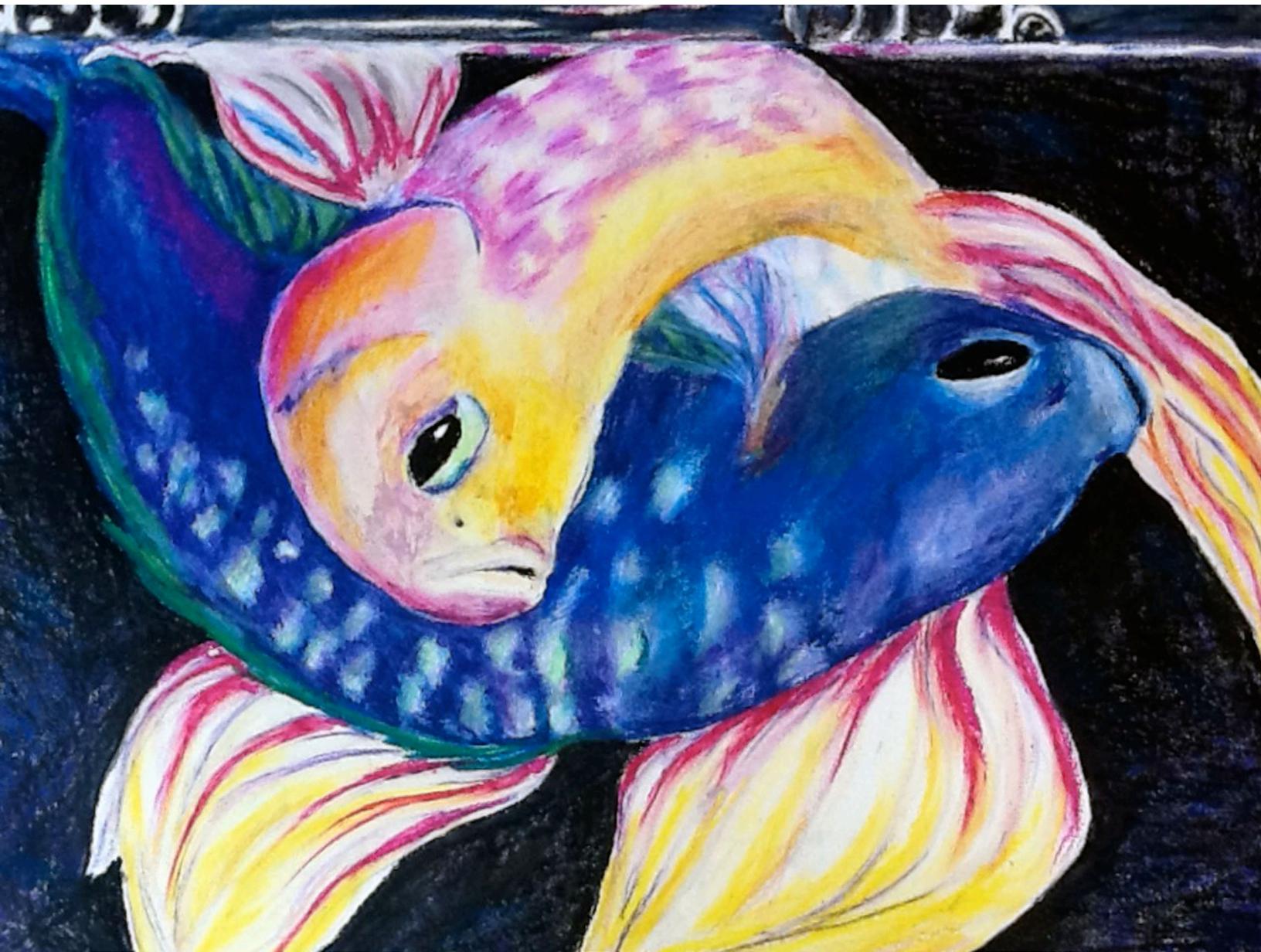
I like to think this is how we live our lives—  
separate pieces tossed together,

not always planned, but reckless.  
I mean, recklessly beautiful.

Free Exhibit  
*William Davies Jr.*

The clouds form  
a long, white femur  
on a spread of blue,  
as if someone had  
finally figured out  
how to make  
The Shroud of Turin  
available to the faithful.

Mate *Rachel Jones*



# Girl With Guitar

*donnarkevic*

Boys called me dyke  
before I knew what it meant  
to be lonely.

I stole a guitar  
from a one-legged man,  
a dirty fixture at the bus station  
like an ash tray  
where the crushed gather.  
When I walked away,  
he shouted I'd better run.

At the pawn shop,  
the clerk ransacked me,  
his larcenous eyes like the girl  
with the five-point stars  
I let feel me up, her hands  
frisking, finding me  
short of her desire.

At night on the edge of the bed,  
I pluck five surviving strings,  
while through the open window,  
the anonymity of howling trains  
holds hostage any sound  
I might consider music.

# Community Spotlight: *Queens Writing Coalition for Creative Seniors*

The Queens Writing Coalition for Creative Seniors is comprised of six older adults, four of whom founded the group in 2003. The Coalition is affiliated with The Queens Center for Gay Seniors (formerly known as SAGE/Queens), the only community-based senior center in the Borough providing comprehensive educational and recreational activities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered older adults. (To learn more about the Center and its programs for LGBT seniors, contact, John Nagel, Director, at [JNagel@QueensCommunityHouse.org](mailto:JNagel@QueensCommunityHouse.org))

One day each week, the six members of the Coalition meet for 90 minutes to read aloud their original stories and share with each other critiques, editing ideas, and inspiration. While a daunting task for writers of any age, members are challenged each week to create new work, using specific assignments and general writing prompts given to them by the instructor to develop a diverse range of short stories, creative nonfiction, plays, poems and essays. The work contained in this collection is just a mere sampling of the talented prose the members put forth within the group each week.

# Road to a New Life

## *Astri Bonn*

Amy learned to drive a car in her late forties, on the back roads of the small Cape Cod town she lived for years. While she liked the area, the lack of year-round employment and the recent breakup of her relationship encouraged her to start anew elsewhere. After selling the furnishings in her apartment and packing up her belongings, she drove south to Westchester, New York, where she arranged to stay in a small home belonging to a couple she met at the Cape. It was here that she began to make major changes in her life.

To start, Amy took computer lessons at a local high school, and with her secretarial background was able to land temporary assignments to make ends meet. Still, she was lonely. She had few friends in New York and wanted to meet someone special. One day she heard about an upcoming women's dance that sounded promising. The only problem was that it was to be held at a social club a good distance from her home. A local map showed her that the easiest and fastest route to the club was by major highway. This frightened her, as she always made it a point to avoid such thoroughfares, thrown off by heavy traffic, speeding cars and quick lane changes.

But Amy was determined not to let fear stop her from creating new beginnings and meeting new friends. With careful plotting on the map, Amy found a new course to take to the club using back roads and side streets. While longer and more complex, she knew this was the best way for her. But just to be sure, she performed several "dry runs" in the weeks leading up to the dance, driving the route until she felt comfortable with the different roads and the myriad of turns she needed to make.

At last the day of the dance arrived. Amy, with cautious excitement, drove the now familiar route to the club. After parking her car, she walked in and was greeted by many women. She was invited to sit at a table with a large group, and not long after an attractive lady asked her to dance. They stayed on the floor for hours, and at the end of the night exchanged numbers. When Amy returned to the car, being very tired from the evening, she considered, for the briefest moment, taking the highway, the faster way, home. But as she started the car she knew she could not do so, not because she was scared, but because the other way suited her best.



As a young girl I was quiet, shy, and so I developed a passion for writing to express my innermost feelings. I filled notebooks with whatever was on my mind or was troubling me at the time. In my Advanced English class in high school the emphasis was on creative writing, poetry, and journalism. The short stories I wrote were mainly mysteries, my preferred reading and writing subject both then and now. I also began writing song lyrics, which I have saved and continued working on over the years. My poetry, verse, and lyrics continue to express on paper what comes from the soul. For me, it is an unending passion.

## Albatross

*Carl Eden*



My name is Carl Eden.

The lady Eve was already taken.

I am at the age when you say to yourself. "How did I get to still be here?"

I am a writer and a poet and I can happily say that I write what I like, not what I have to write.

What is left is to be read and to be paid for!

Viva adversity, perversity and phantasy.

I saw it follow the day of the sea.

White as the spinning wake it stalked.

I cast off my dreams to it.

They left together.

Milk wings waving farewell

In the nights swallowing.

My continent of deck

Is left to silence.

There are ports now and then

Where easy arms wave

In a man-made breeze.

The birds flail again

In the spume of meeting.

Sometimes, there are feathers

In the swells.

I loved here, once before.

## Exposé

*Connie Vien*

Six months after I was born, my mother noticed that my eyes did not follow objects put in front of me. I was taken to three specialists who all verified that I was born blind. It appeared that I had contracted an infection coming out of my mother's birth canal. My mother took it harder than my father as she felt responsible for my affliction. The doctors tried to convince her that it happens more frequently than people think, that it was not her fault.

It was hard at first for my family, but with time, patience and money we managed to forge ahead. When I reached my tenth birthday my parents sent me to a school for the blind. I learned how to read Braille, how to walk with authority, take public transportation, to perform everyday normal activities. Eventually, I went on to college and graduated with a teaching degree, specializing in working with the blind. My first job was in a home environment, tutoring a young blind girl. I lived with her and her parents during the week, and on weekends I went back home with my parents. On Sundays we went to church, and sometimes after the services were over the congregants would head to a local park for a picnic. This is where I met Justin.

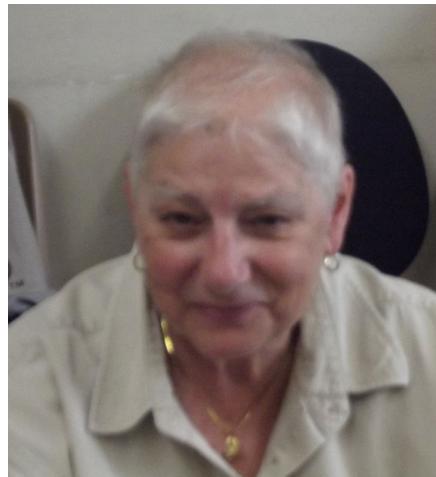
I was taking a short walk away from the group when I rammed my cane into a big pine tree. Immediately, a man came up and asked me if I needed help. I was flustered and angry that I had misjudged my steps and made it clear I didn't need any assistance. The man said he was sorry, that he hadn't meant any harm. I could tell by his voice that my reaction had hurt him. I felt bad and apologized for my bad temper. We talked a bit and he told me his name was Justin. When I told him my name was Sandra, he said, "I know. I sit near you in church every Sunday." That's how we began.

I didn't understand it at the time, but to Justin I was a "prize catch." I also thought he was wonderful. I loved holding his soft hands, and when our lips touched I burned with desire. I wished many times he would take it further, but after nearly a year of dating, he had never tried to go further than kissing. I liked it at first – that he respected me and wanted to take time before getting intimate – but after awhile I began to feel that I repulsed him because of my blindness. One day I asked him why he avoided my advances. My exact words were, "Are you ashamed of me?" Justin assured me he wasn't, but I sensed something was wrong. Finally, when things didn't change between us, I told him it was over – that I needed more out of our relationship. I remember how sad I was when he said nothing in return, just took me home and we parted.

A month went by without my hearing from Justin. He even stopped going to church. It was a terrible time for me. I went through the motions of life during the day, but at night, when I was alone, I could not stop crying. Then one Sunday, outside church, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder, heard Justin's gentle voice: "Can we go somewhere and talk, Sandra?" I could not say no. We got into his car and he drove to a secluded spot. He turned off the ignition and started to speak. He asked that I let him finish before I responded. He took my hands and said that he loved me from the first time he set his eyes on me. That he wanted more than anything to make love to me but didn't dare. That, like my blindness he had also suffered with something since birth. Finally, he said: "I came into this world as Justine...not Justin. But I always looked and felt like a boy. I was ridiculed when I went to school. I grew up and moved away and decided to live as a man. I never dated. I avoided any intimacy. I was fine living like that until I met you." He paused. "Now it's your turn to talk, Sandra. Do you never want to see me again?"

I needed time to think, and asked that he take me home. I spent the night wrestling with both our demons, and finally came to a decision. I called him the next day and told him I could not live without the person I fell in love with. I said: "I might not be able to see you with my eyes, but my heart feels and sees a wonderful human being. That's all that matters."

Soon, we will be married. I have never been so happy. I can't wait to become Justin's wife. Love, you see, has made me blind.



Funny how I can create stories about murder, romance but when I am asked to write about myself I am at loss for words. My writing began innocently enough — to be honest I thought it was a big joke. My friends at the senior center begged me to join the writing group, but I laughed and said no way. They were persistent, so at the ripe age of 64 I joined. It wasn't always easy; I sometimes doubted my writing and my ability to keep up with other QAmembers. I even dropped out a few times, but the other members would not give up on me. With their support, I started to take writing more seriously and soon it became an obsession. Now I get lost in my stories; my imagination has developed and so has my vocabulary. It almost seems like my pen comes "alive" when I write, taking me to places I would have never gone. I would have to say we seniors need something to keep our minds active, and to me writing is one such thing.

# What A Gift

*Pratip Dasgupta*

Every year Joseph spent Christmas according to his whim. Being a loner by nature, he usually stayed home by himself, unless someone called and suggested going somewhere. Not having any close relatives after the death of his parents a few years ago, the 25-year old man preferred to plan his life any way he wished; he didn't care about conventions and had no feeling for religion. However, Joseph had a few hobbies. At college he had been considered a nerd, being more interested in reading, collecting copies of antiques (he couldn't afford to buy the originals) and playing word games. Being a librarian at a small private library in a suburban town, he had a relaxed job with little stress and could pursue his interests.

Christmas and other holidays didn't mean much to Joseph. However, he enjoyed the festivities without direct participation. He would watch the lights, listen to the songs and look at the snow, if there was any. Sometimes he would go out and take photos of snowmen built by children and icicles in the tree branches. Today was an unusually warm and sunny Christmas Eve. Because of the last week's storm having caused a great deal of damage and a few deaths, the festive spirit seemed subdued. He started to wonder if it was really the holiday season.

The doorbell rang. At first, Joseph was hesitant to open the door since he wasn't expecting any visitor. The bell rang again and he went and looked through the glass door. It was a deliveryman from UPS standing there with a package. He looked impatient as if he had to do a few deliveries and didn't want to wait any longer. Joseph opened the door and the man handed him his package after making him sign the gadget with a stylus and Joseph laughed silently at the illegible signature so different from his usual one. After their usual holiday greetings the UPS man left. Joseph looked at the package, which had no indication of the sender or the nature of the contents.

The package was wrapped nicely with usual red and green ribbons and bows and his name and address were neatly typed. Whenever Joseph received a gift, he always was reluctant to open it right away. He loved the package itself and didn't want to damage the wrappings, which was unavoidable. Also, he liked the suspense of the gift and waited as long as he could before opening it. For him the thrill of waiting was more enjoyable than the gift itself. Today was no different. Joseph held the package and kept looking at it, wondering what was in it and who had sent it. Since he couldn't guess either, he finally untied the ribbons and carefully removed the bows. Then he used a letter opener to cut off the pieces of scotch tapes and flattened the wrapping paper. If the paper would be usable, he would wrap his own last minute gift in it for someone, hopefully by New Year.

Now came the moment of truth. The package was a square box with a design of candles, reindeer, and snowflakes and as he opened it, there was another smaller box in it. There were more boxes of decreasing sizes like the Russian dolls, which he used to find fascinating when he was a child. When he opened the fifth box, there was a small magnifying glass and another box. Hoping that this would reveal the mysterious gift, Joseph



Since a young age, I have been writing short stories, poems and essays, some of which were published in school magazines. After I moved to the United States, I continued to write sporadically, but since my retirement in 1999, I became involved in several projects, including writing for local magazines and newsletters. The writing group has helped me a great deal, especially in learning new techniques. I greatly value the insights and support that I receive each week from my fellow seniors.

put the magnifying glass aside and opened the tiny box, which looked like a jewelry box. The object inside was so tiny that he almost dropped it. It was round and flat and he used a pair of tweezers to hold it and with the magnifying glass in his other hand, looked at it. It was a coin and he tried to read the inscription. After some magnification he read it. No, the writing wasn't strange. It was not in any unfamiliar script, but in good old Latin, although a bit stylized and the spellings were unusual. Joseph realized that it was a Roman coin with the picture and name of Julius Caesar.

Joseph was dumbfounded. He never could imagine receiving such a gift. He thought maybe it was a fake one, sent as a joke, since some of his friends liked to send him peculiar things just to tease him, especially on April Fools' Day. But then he noticed a carefully folded small piece of paper, together with the magnifying glass. As he unfolded and read it, he found it was a certificate of authenticity of the antiquity of the coin. Joseph was happy to have such a rare item in his possession and started to wonder who was the anonymous sender. After a while he realized who it was. It must be his High School friend Thomas who used to share his hobby of collecting "antique" objects. After losing contact they had recently found each other and resumed their friendship. If it was indeed Thomas who sent the gift, then he must start consider sending him something in return. But how could he top the coin. He began to make plans.

## The Heat

### *Richie Betancourt*

He stared up at the ceiling. The heat was stifling. Still, he shivered in the darkness. Perhaps it was the remnants of alcohol? He had gone to a bar the night before, a usual occurrence when on a business trip, but only for a nightcap. Well two gin and tonics, to be exact, certainly not enough to make him senseless. So why was he now so confused? Why was he unsure whose bed he was in, or whose hotel room? If only he could turn on a light to orient himself, but he could find no lamp, no switch on the wall. Desperate, he took to the floor, crawled slowly on hands and feet, feeling his way around the room for the door. But when he finally found it, rose and grabbed at the knob, he discovered it would not turn. Enraged he pounded against the door with a heavy fist, screamed for help, but no one came, no one answered. He slumped to the floor, tried to figure out what was happening to him. The only thing that made sense was that he was a prisoner, trapped on purpose in this windowless, barren room. He could no longer wait. He had to get free. The only way out was the door. He would have to break it down. He stood and lowered his shoulder, prepared to break through, no matter the toll it took on his body, his bones. He took a final breath, began his charge...and woke up. He stared up at the ceiling. The heat was stifling. Still, he shivered in the darkness.



I was born in Brooklyn in July 1950. I first started writing creatively in high school, but stopped after attending college and then going to work for the airlines for 30 years. My career in this industry ended after 9/11, when I, like many staff, were furloughed due to decline in airline traffic. By then I was writing again, sharing work with a friend who was enthusiastic about the direct, honest and simple approach I took with my short stories. This encouraged me to join the writing group and further develop my writing style. One of the projects I am currently working on is an autobiography about "coming out" since the 1970's, and the prejudice I encountered towards gays and lesbians when I worked for the airlines.

# The Problem

*Ric Suarez*

James is somewhat of a loner. His social life consists of interaction with staff and customers at the library he works. But he would really like to meet someone for more than just casual interaction. He would like to meet that “special someone.”

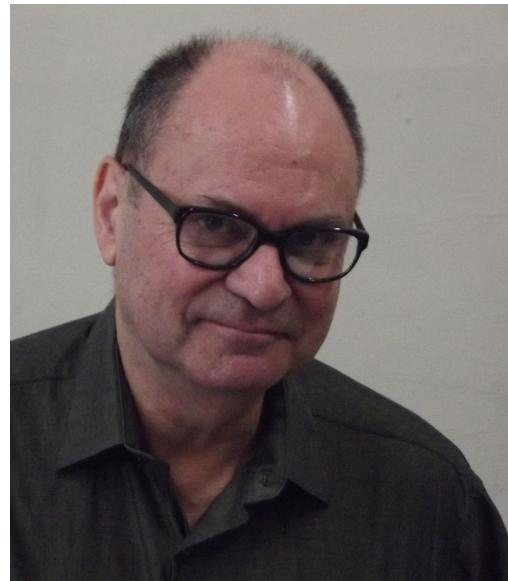
James rarely goes to gay bars, but he is determined to “put himself out there” no matter how uncomfortable it makes him. So during a work break, he logs onto the Internet and finds a bar that is within walking distance of the library. He decides to go that night. At nine o’clock, after closing the library, he walks the eight blocks to the bar, takes a deep breath, closes his eyes for courage, and pushes through the front door. Inside it is dark and smells strongly of whiskey. As his eyes adjust to the lack of light, he spies an empty stool at the bar. He sits down and orders a drink.

As James sips from the glass, a man sits next to him. Stealing glances in the mirror stretching behind the bar, James decides that the man is attractive. After a few minutes, the man turns to James and introduces himself as Brian.

James is immediately impressed. Brian looks near to him in age, has a nice outgoing way about him, is clearly smart, and a good conservationist. And, sitting face-to-face, James realizes that Brian isn’t just attractive, he is gorgeous.

They speak for a while and James senses that Brian is interested in him as well. James tells Brian that he is a librarian, and Brian explains that he is a television reporter. They talk some more and James learns that Brian works long, unpredictable hours, and that what he misses most is the chance to eat “home-cooked meals.” When Brian gets up to leave for an assignment, James, fearful he might never see him again, gathers his courage and invites Brian to his house for dinner, explaining that he is an excellent cook. To James’ amazement, Brian accepts the invitation. They make arrangements and even hug before they part.

James is surprised that after going out for the first time in such a long time he would meet a nice guy and so quickly. He feels lucky, amazingly good and happy. But these happy thoughts soon turn to terror as he thinks about dinner, his claiming to be an excellent cook. In reality, James does not know how to cook... anything. He wishes he had suggested they do anything else, but perhaps it was the lure of a home cooked meal that made Brian accept the invitation. Regardless, he



All my life I have worked as an accountant. Numbers were my thing. I could easily develop financial statements or prepare a tax return. But, at the same time, I agonized over doing a simple one-page business letter. The month I retired I learned about the writing group and knew I had to join. In the beginning, it would take me days to write an assignment, and I was unsure if what I was submitting was any good. But, with guidance from the instructor and helpful suggestions from fellow members, my writing has improved and I have gained in confidence. While I still have a way to go, I can honestly say that when I put thoughts on paper, they clearly and precisely express what I am thinking; now I say what I am thinking, no more, no less. I no longer dread writing. I look forward to it.

has to make it happen, and decides that the one thing he might be able to pull off is pasta. He knows he can't ruin spaghetti – just throw it into a pot of water and set to boil - but making sauce is too much to consider. He could buy Ragu or another brand of sauce at a supermarket, but worries that anything coming from a can or a jar will not taste homemade. He decides instead to find the best Italian restaurant in the area, and on the night Brian is to come over, purchase from them some sauce, no matter the price.

James' plan works perfectly, or so he thinks. A few hours before Brian comes over, he picks up a container of sauce from Lugie's, an acclaimed eatery. He applies this to his finished pasta, makes a salad, even heats up some bread, and serves it all to Brian at the kitchen table, as if he was used to making such meals. They eat, talk, laugh, and have fun. At the end of the night, before Brian leaves, they not only hug again, but kiss. James is elated.

The next day James, still glowing from the dinner, received an email from Brian. It read:

James:

Thanks for a lovely evening. You are a terrific guy and I am looking forward to seeing you again soon. I never mentioned that I sometimes report as a food critic. As a critic I can say that your dinner was amazing. The salad was perfect, the pasta al dente, but the sauce was awesome. In fact, I would give your sauce the same 4 stars I recently gave to Lugie's. Next time we'll eat there, my treat.

Affectionately,

Brian



## Instructor

### *John McCaffrey*

John McCaffrey graduated from the City College of New York's creative writing program. The Book of Ash, his first novel, will be released in October 2013. He is honored each week to have the opportunity to listen to the wonderfully imaginative and creative stories written by the seniors in the group and, now and again, to offer insight and guidance. Find him at: <http://johnamccaffrey.wordpress.com/>

# Twelve Cigarettes

*Aislinn Batstone*

I'm sitting with my back against the Carousel's fence when the girl appears, an athletic sort with freckled skin and hands shoved deep in the pockets of a pink hoodie, blond hair whipping across her cheeks.

"Any chance of a ride?" she says.

I'm nowhere near the ticket booth or entryway. "We don't open for another hour." I stub my cigarette on the dewy grass and fix my own hair up in a ponytail with the elastic from my wrist. At eight on a spring weekend morning Sydney's Domain is usually quiet, particularly on the tourist front. I look the girl over. She's rural. I squint out across the harbour like I have a genuine purpose in gazing off into the distance, when actually she's making me nervous.

She's tall and angular, this girl, but unselfconscious and therefore ten times more attractive than me. "Aw, go on," she says, bouncing from heel to toe of her Volleys.

That makes me smile. "All right." I stand and brush the grass off my black skirt. I open the entryway for her and let myself into the booth. "Pick a horse, any horse."

"Aren't you coming too?" She stands inside the enclosure looking at the horses the way the five and six year olds do; they're old enough to realise they have a choice, and it should be fun but in fact it's not so easy. At least she's probably not scared she's going to fall off. "Oh, you're a beauty," she says to Indira, who is white with a jewelled harness and a smart brown saddle.

I flick the switch and jog over to the Carousel, climb onto Henry on the inside of Indira. "I'm Kirky," I say, extending my hand as Henry goes up and Indira goes down.

"Therese." She shakes my hand.

Around and around we go with the music, holding our gold-painted poles. Joggers are curious but nobody stops. Around and around, we watch the Opera House go by, the Botanical Gardens, Mrs Macquarie's Chair, the Heads, the Harbour, and back to the Opera House. My experience of the Carousel is much improved by riding on it. As we ease to a halt, Therese says, "That was great. I was here with my folks yesterday but I was too embarrassed to get on with all the little kids."

"How long are you here for?"

"Just the weekend."

"Where are you from?"

"Kenilworth, Queensland."

"Never heard of it." I look at my watch. Thirty minutes till my shift starts. "Let's sit in the shade."

On a park bench, she tells me what Kenilworth is like. "Lots of cows. Hot, sunny, clean. It's dirty here." She points her Volley at a soft drink can and around on the grass I notice scraps of paper, cigarette butts. She asks me where I live.

"Here."

“Sydney?”

“This park.” I light a cigarette.

She does a surprised face just like in a Warner Brothers cartoon. “What about your family?”

“It’s a long story.” I take a drag of my cigarette and shoot the smoke out my nostrils. “Wanna do something tonight?” I say.

“Okay.”

“Meet me at nine on the Opera House stairs.”

“Do you have a phone?” She actually blushes.

I put out my cigarette and flick it into the rubbish bin. “Not at the moment.”

\*\*\*

Holly hangs out the booth window to remind me for the third time not to admit parents who haven’t paid for tickets. Her face is creased like a walnut and I remind myself I must stop smoking in my twenties.

As the day wears on and the Carousel turns, I wonder what to do with Therese tonight. I hope she doesn’t want to go to the cinema or eat anywhere other than Burger King. Maybe we can drink in the park. I’m saving for a place to live. I wonder if I can tell her that and if I don’t, how she will assume I spend my money. Lucky she doesn’t seem like the kind of girl to assume too much.

\*\*\*

I arrive early for our date, of course, but I don’t start worrying she won’t come until after nine. I smoke twelve cigarettes in a row. I don’t have anything better to do, so I wait, and in the end I’m glad I did, because at a quarter past ten she appears.

Her explanation is rushed, wide-eyed and earnest, something to do with her parents and a family dinner; it’s like hot water on brown sugar, and after a while she stops talking and collapses beside me on the stairs. I point out landmarks. The Rocks, the Ferries, Luna Park. We decide to go for a walk.

The Carousel slumbers. Boat lamps on the harbour reflect the stars in the black velvet sky. Towards the middle of the Gardens, trees form a dense, dark forest and the fruit bats shriek in the middle of it like creatures from another world.

We step inside and the volume goes up like some drunk has spun the dial.

I say, with a lack of certainty apparent to both of us, “This is not their most active time of night.” There are many things I want to show Therese in here, but maybe night is not the best time to see the giant fig trees, the waterlilies and the swans.

We walk into a cloud of eau de bat poo.

“I don’t want to be here.” Therese grabs my hand.

“Me either!” We turn and run yelling towards the open night.

We laugh on the path until I double over, panting.

“Let’s go back the other way,” I say. We walk towards the Carousel and I open the gate. “I can’t turn it on,” I say. “It lights up like a carousel or something.”

She laughs at my not-even-joke and chooses a horse. She says, “You could come up and stay at Kenilworth, you know. You could catch the train.” She misinterprets my silence as scepticism. “There’s lots of work on the farms.”

I stroke Umberto’s hard plastic mane with my thumb. “I haven’t even met your parents.”

“I told them about you.”

My feelings are like finger paint, green and purple, muddy. Her parents know about her derelict friend.

She says, “Don’t let me leave without giving you my details.”

I walk her back to her hotel. She writes her address and phone number on a piece of paper for me. “You can stay with us,” she assures me, and I can’t help wonder what her parents really said.

She waits a long time for me to say something, not understanding I’m thinking of the money stashed in my duffle, the money I’m saving for a place of my own. She doesn’t understand what that she’s asking of me.

“Well, see you,” she says.

“See you.”

“Give Indira a pat for me.”

“I will.”

“And take care of yourself.” She walks backwards towards the hotel doors. She’s as reluctant to leave as I am to see her go.

“I will take care of myself.” Some lever goes down inside me at this promise and my mind finally starts to operate while my heart turns around and around in my chest. “I’ll see you in Kenilworth. I’ll get there. I hope you mean it.”

She breaks into that broad grin. “Of course! I’ll teach you to ride a real horse.”

She has no idea what she’s signed up for, how enthusiastic I may prove to be. Walking back to the Domain, I calculate how to go about things. I can afford the trip but I’ll wait a few days before I take the train. I don’t want to look desperate. For no apparent reason Therese seems to like me and, God knows, I want to trust her. The feeling in my heart builds up until it actually starts to hurt, and I want to give Therese something even though she’s not here, but I think I know just what she might like.

I get my cigarettes out of my bag and throw them in the rubbish bin beside the Carousel. Then in the clear starry night, I turn on the ride, and the music starts, and the lights go on, and I watch the Carousel turn, gilded and gorgeous in Sydney’s velvet night.

# Holding Hands Outside a Pro-Family Rally with my Seed Inside You

*Stephen Mills*

Seed that won't ever take root.  
Or grow into a sapling: a start  
to a life that may or may not  
be worth living. Not all seeds  
are meant for the long haul.  
Some die young, ripped from  
the soil too soon. Some never  
stand a chance, like mine  
somewhere up inside you  
where you like to keep it as long  
as possible. The people inside  
are talking about family, about  
values, about saving marriage.  
They come and go from the doors,  
faces pale and confused  
by the crowd that has gathered  
peacefully with signs about love,  
equality, acceptance. They firmly  
believe in our sinfulness, in our  
wrongdoing, yet I doubt most  
of them can even imagine  
the things we've done,  
which might warrant such  
judgments. I also doubt that any  
of them are thinking about  
the possibility of my seed inside  
you at this very moment. Doubt  
they know how long you can hold it  
within you, or how long you can still  
feel my cock hours after we've fucked.  
I doubt they would call this love,  
though I can't think of any other way  
to define it as I stand here  
with my hand in your hand knowing  
pieces of me are still inside you,  
still begging to survive.

# The Sea Stone

*Marissa Cohen*

The first time I go to visit, I see the piles of newly polished gemstones on her kitchen table. She's been collecting gems from the shoreline again.

I'm only there ten minutes and the tear of my fins becoming legs already feels like impossible choice, one human foot longing to stretch from my water home to the land she nurtures and lives on. I shift uncomfortably and focus on her.

*Take what you want, she tells me.*

I drop my backpack on the floor and pick one that is red with thick, brown stripes along it. It is shaped like a kidney bean. It fits perfectly into the palm of my hand and seems to pulse like a heart.

*Of course that's the one you pick. It reminded me of you from the first, she says.*

Our connection is solid, but the long distance part of us is murky, mysterious, already clogged with seaweed. But it is love that makes me hide my secret fins under rough jeans. It makes me ignore my slick, black seal pelt, thick with the smell of fish and seaweed, that I have ditched on her doorstep. I try



to pretend that I am fast; I will not get caught between earth and water.

It is her fate to be the sure one, the constant one. If she'd been born a fisherman in another time, she would have cast her nets into the ocean at precisely the same time each dawn, as thought she could bring her strong will to bear against briny chaos.

If that is her role, mine is to wrestle with all that happens in the space between the ocean and her arms. My body is unwilling to change from mermaid to human yet. I worry it will be no use. On the plane, I wipe ocean water from my legs in the tiny airline bathroom and take deep breaths, trying to breathe air on land, now that I have left the sea.

She tells me the story of how she found my red stone: *I wanted it, but then it floated away. The tide took it out. It washed away in sea foam. I knew I had to be patient, so I knelt in the water. And eventually it resurfaced and floated into my hand*, she said.

That's just like her, to wait until nature yields, with her thick black boots stern against the water like an exclamation point, skimming between the rough sea and the shoreline, her black watch cap jammed over her fine hair, one ungloved hand in the sharp, clear water, planting her feet until connection finally reaches back for her.

How is she to know that I have come to her dripping of another home?

Even though gifts given from the sea should not be willingly kept, she reaches for me. I ignore the pain throbbing in my human feet, take the stone from her, and raise my lips to hers, intent on being found.

*Don't look down, I want to tell her. My fins are not truly legs, yet.*

Or perhaps I should say what I long to believe: *Ignore the seal pelt dropped on your front porch. It is proof that I swam inland, all the way to you alone, not proof that I will go.*

# hands

*T'ai Freedom Ford*

i have been preoccupied with my hands. in patches, the dead yellowed skin on my palms is shedding itself. my hands are not a fan of bleach nor dog shit. but it takes one to clean the other. at first, the hands scaled and itched. i scratched so much in my sleep, my partner, back turned, believed i was masturbating. a filthy floor requires bleach. any girl, even a tomboy, knows this by the time she is seven. these hands have always been wrinkled beyond their age. the knuckles on the right requiring a bigger ring size than the left from years of cracking. my hands are small. too small for my height. people shorter than me often have hands bigger than mine when we place palms flat together. i call them my worker monkey hands—small and good for fixing shit, for rescuing earrings wedged between car seats. i do not find this peeling of hands symbolic. a bit problematic and certainly symptomatic, but not symbolic. it just is. i joke with my girl that she has put an ugly hand hex on me to keep me from mojoing any cuties. lesbian hands are important. at once, practical and sexual: they hang blinds and orchestrate orgasms. clean-up dog shit, penetrate asses. they should not be crusty, dry, yellowed, peeling like mine. a curse, perhaps? no. this is not symbolic. i am at once exasperated and fascinated by the affliction. i call attention to myself to keep people from wondering. look at my hands, i say, turning my palms toward them. allergic reaction, y'know, bleach and shit. the poets offer me remedy: cocoa butter, shea butter, coconut oil, olive oil, vitamin E oil, Vaseline. i buy a soap of olive oil and aloe. a green chunky square that makes my hands stink. i think i have become obsessed with the picking. tearing at the skin with my teeth and spitting. prodding the puckered white spots until the skin unfolds itself. this obsession is not symbolic. neither are the reddened blotches of tender that are revealed. my fingerprints are vulnerable swirls of new pink. i rub my hands against my forearms. they sing a song of sandpaper. i am conscious of hand-shaking, opting to bump fists instead. this is the second shedding. the first occurred one summer after 9<sup>th</sup> grade when i spent every day playing basketball. the rubbery tread of the ball ripped my hands raw. my hands amuse me. i look at them and can't help but laugh. on my right thumb, a swatch of skin has puckered in the shape of a heart. i think of my lady and smile. this is not symbolic.

# Becoming Mel

## *Mel King*

My mother, unlike many, only chose one name before I was born. She knew, in that way that sometimes mothers claim to know things about their unborn babies, that I was going to be a girl. She also knew that when I turned sixteen I would hate my name. Believing this to be irrefutably true, she passed off the responsibility of naming me to my six year old brother. Fortunately for me, he took the job seriously. He spent hours poring over names and slept with a baby name book next to his bed. Ultimately, he chose “Melanie” – not for the character in *Gone with the Wind* – but for its sound and its meaning: dark. My middle name “Irene” was chosen as a formality, a sign of respect to my grandmother – Mabel Irene – whose initials I would share.

“Melanie” never fit. It felt like a hand-me-down shirt that was too tight in the shoulders and too short in the arms. Any time someone defaulted to “Mel” or came up with another nickname to call me, I could shrug the garment off – at least for a little while. I thought that everyone hated their name. I thought that everyone tensed every time it was called out in class, that everyone had the same sick feeling in their stomach when they had to introduce themselves.

Early on, I got the idea stuck in the back of my head that I would grow up to be Shawn from *Boy Meets World*. Played by 90s teen heartthrob Rider Strong, Shawn was the best friend of the main protagonist Corey. Unlike Corey, his parents were divorced and only sporadically involved in his life. His tough veneer cast him as a bad boy, troubled and failing classes, but he had a good heart. He was a harmless rebel kid from the wrong side of the tracks and I knew that I was going to grow up to be him. Not be like him, but actually become him.

In fall of sixth grade, I decided to cut my shoulder length hair to a boyish bob-meets-bowl-cut with the same middle part that Shawn had. I knew that my transformation was going to happen eventually, that I just had to wait it out, but it couldn’t hurt to help the process along.

I had an art teacher in seventh grade – Mrs. Donovan – a stern woman who was particularly serious about her craft for a middle school teacher. I’d heard from other kids who’d had her that she was “a total bitch.” On our first day of class, she read off the attendance list to make sure we were all where we were supposed to be. The classroom was dominated by six humongous wooden tables that had been pushed together to create one communal work area. We sat on tall metal stools around its perimeter. She got halfway through the alphabet when she read off my name,

“Melanie King?” I felt the tightness in my chest that always happened during roll call. My face flushed.

“Uh, here.” I raised my hand, hoping she couldn’t see my ears turning pink.

“Huh. Do people call you Mel?” I felt a weight lifted off my chest as I nodded.

“Yeah, sometimes.”

“Well, you look like a ‘Melvin’ to me. I’m going to call you ‘Melvin.’” She didn’t ask permission; it wasn’t a question. It was a decree.

So, for the rest of the semester, until we had to rotate arts to the music section, I was Melvin for an hour and a half every other day. I loved it.

I waited for my big transformation into Shawn Hunter until my sixteenth birthday, until much too long after my chest had begun to protrude from its former surfboard flatness. I waited until I knew, unequivocally, that there was no going back; I'd never grow up to be the boy I thought I would. At least not without some intervention from the outside world.

At sixteen, I also started the arduous process of renaming myself. "Melanie" was not who I ever felt myself to be and I could not reconcile "Mel" as anything but a nickname. For a year and a half, I slept with a baby name book under my pillow. I tried to find names I liked the sound of or the meaning behind.

I tried to be 'M.', but it was too short. There were too many questions when your name was just a letter.

I tried to be 'Shawn,' but it felt too forced and too frequent a reminder of the boy I wasn't.

'M. Shawn' was a complex iteration of self and fantasy that lasted a month or two before I let 'Shawn' go for good.

I liked 'Fionn' for its Irish strength, harkening to folktale hero Fionn McCool. I liked it, but it wasn't me.

'Milo' could have been the one. The name resonated closely with my given name and was masculine and androgynous at the same time. But there was friction between the new man and who I would be until I got there. I felt the place rubbed raw like I'd been chafed by a canvas strap across the shoulder. I wasn't 'Milo.'

My friends, family, girlfriend were endlessly frustrated by my lack of identity. Without a name, I had nothing to be called, nothing to write on top of papers. Endless blank spaces and nothing but questions. It was frustrating for others and a deep well of self-hate for me. One friend, however, did her very best to keep up. For each new name, she would find some flimsy excuse to send me a card – thinking of you, haven't seen you in a while, almost your birthday – each card a whisper that I was on the right path. The acknowledgement, however slight, kept me searching for myself. I lay awake at night, restless with indecision, trying to will the answer to appear before me.

The realization came to me slowly, as though when my back was turned, but with the persistence of a quiet truth: I could make 'Mel' more than a nickname. I could make 'Mel' the person I am and the person I wanted to be. It was just a name, but I got to decide what that meant. So, 'Mel' became the person I constructed from the pieces of me that worked, picking and choosing as I went along, discarding the parts that had failed me.

There been so much more to my transition than a name, but a name was the place where I could begin. Nearly ten years after my first grappling with my name, 'Mel' has become routine. No longer question or struggle, the only consternation I ever have these days is in a loud room when introductions are made and a monosyllabic first name can be hard to make out.

"Hi, I'm Mel," I say trying to be as clear as possible.

"Mike?" The person has only half heard me.

"Mel." I try again, slower and louder.

"Ah, is that short for something?"

"No, it's just Mel." And that's all I need to say.

## Miscellaneous

*Joseph Davison-Duddles*

(i) “Gasps are held within palms and plastic bags.  
Sat within gullets, urging, howling in the curve  
of stomachs. In the dislocated space between pavements  
and feet. Between the coins in my hand and your register,  
your overall, your wet-look hair, your clenched shoulders.”

(ii) “This is not an endgame. The managers  
have promised us salvation in the form of two chocolate  
digestives,  
thoughts of promotion, an open window over the town –  
and my hands dragging along the sky, pulling stars  
from their rightful place like coins tonight  
I want to tattoo myself with your doubt –  
to hide behind your old confusion’s denim.

(i) “But they will build your flesh like mine: to the scars  
of inner-city dreams sunk into an old trainer...  
a cigarette, an iron, two sweating hands, and anger.  
Neither game is soon written to end and  
the curtain to fall upon us both like a wedding veil.”

# Whiskey With a Feminist

*Alicia Deer*

We decided on drinks and I paid  
not because I wore the slacks  
and you wore the blouse,  
but because I asked you.

You turned the topic to politics  
and I diverted to Regina Spektor,  
told you that you look like her.  
It turned out you were both Russian,  
but all you wanted to talk about  
was misogyny. I brought up  
literature, asked you about  
your favorite authors  
and you boasted how you almost  
seduced a lit professor  
just to say you could.

You said you wished that character  
was like a credit card you could  
use to pay for things,  
then asked what you should order next.  
I'd seen just enough Sex and the City  
to suggest a Manhattan  
without knowing it was whiskey  
and it turned out  
you didn't like their whiskey.  
We made your consumption  
an exercise in being a better person,  
and I was your Character Platinum Card  
for the night.

Three hours passed as smoothly  
as butter on breakfast toast,  
which I was sure  
I'd be making you.  
I used my one line:  
"you don't actually want to go home,  
do you?" and you didn't.

You stayed and we stopped at the corner  
store where you picked out  
the most expensive whiskey  
to make the point that you only drink

good whiskey.  
You stayed long enough to keep  
your buzz and left early enough  
that no one could accuse you  
of being easy.

You left without knowing  
that I'd been rejected  
by prettier women,  
with more to say  
and better taste.



# Daylight Savings Time

*William Davies Jr.*

The morning blushes  
as if having been  
out all night  
it looks in from  
the other-side of the door  
penniless and tired.



Tegan (One Year Later) *Amelia Carley*

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*“It is through art, and through art only, that we can realize our perfection; through art and art only that we can shield ourselves from the sordid perils of actual existence.*

*-Oscar Wilde*