

# EDITORS' FOREWORD

We thank you for perusing this year's spring issue of *Euphony*. As always, we seek to provide a varied, well-written selection of current literature. This season, our stories feature characters and scenarios that make us turn around and look twice while our poetry surprises us with vivid images that linger even after we have flipped to the next page. Frogs, doctors, and college classrooms, among other things, all make appearances.

Unfortunately, this spring we were unable to publish print copies of *Euphony* due to financial difficulties, and so we will only be publishing an online edition. That being said, we are pleased to announce that with the publication of this year's issues, our financial difficulties are coming to an end, and we will be returning to normal circulation and printing next year. We thank our dedicated readers for your continual support and look forward to a bright future. And as usual, always feel free to send us your pieces, thoughts, and comments via email or on our Facebook page!

THE EDITORS



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*Euphony* is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations. Visit our website for more information.

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# Anthony Opal

## Sonnet

the softest sound is the turning down of  
every bicycle from its given tree  
(which is what the eye of the storm cannot  
see) leaves writhing in the breeze shattered  
peonies lining the sidewalks as a  
bird walks like a bride toward the altar  
I mean the park at the end of the street  
(the day's brand new psalter) I mean the  
girl in the halter-top whose small breasts rise  
and fall like Rome this city of G-d this  
debutante of nothing that is myself sing  
the body more than electric even  
static and still like a rubber band pulled  
taut as the light held across a parking lot

# Jacob Oet

## The Banished Doctors' Colony

### I.

Found the Basiluzzo island, wrecked *The Virginia*. In time, Mother—under house arrest—will remember my number. Cell battery died two hours ago. Upon arrival, strange savages crowded me. Togas on their shoulders, skin gray with ash.

“Howdy, Friend of the Day!” I said, punching him on the arm. It was like punching a wall. So sorry for bleeding over these words. My knuckles, chapped on arrival—ever wonder what sailing a bad winter can do to you?—split.

They boarded me up, wooden tin-man, coffin. I moaned like one already dead, begged and begged. Kindly, they removed the planks from my face and arms, rescued me a wet board from my wrecked ship, gave me a boar’s tooth, and set me to write.

### II.

Mother wore a toga because I wouldn’t—me, her little lap dog—in Rome for three days. Plenty of odd looks. Two free gelati. Once, a beggar feigning blindness poked her in the belly with his cane, said: “My, Kangaroo, your son’s outgrown you.” And that was how I came to hate symbolic dialogue.

Time spread anile legs.

### III.

“My name,” he said, “*was* Doctor. Here, I go by ‘Oedipus.’”

“And me,” another said, “Hermaphroditus.”

“Homer,” another old man—chiseled, eyeless—spat against my cheek.

“Yes,” said I, “I can see that.” There were many more, all named after Greeks, all wearing togas.

“We Romans,” said the one named Sophocles, “enjoy a little Culture.” Clearly insane.

“Liar,” said the one called Hippocrates, “We are all banished doctors, Italians.”

“Oh?” said I, “What did they teach you in Med School?”

Sophocles jettied, “We have been here for thousands of years, waiting for you.”

“Me?” I said.

“Yes, you.”

“You...are doctors?” I laughed. The togas... Homer couldn’t have dissected with a cleaver.

“Under Basiluzzo, you will be buried.” It takes a lot to wake a hibernating bear. Now, that turn of phrase woke me.

Heraclitus said, “We effed up for you.”

I said, “I don’t understand.” An older woman, eating a thunderbolt, winked at me from a mountain.

“To be banished,” Heraclitus continued, “to wait for you. To have the honor of burying you.”

“Oh,” I said, “Why did I sail to this *god-forsaken* place?”

“It was off the map,” Achilles said.

“You had a voice inside your head,” Ajax said.

“To find your biological father,” Telemachus’ voice downloaded from the somehow unsplintered starboard of *The Virginia*—my vessel, the one I pirated to reach this place.

“It is I,” whispered Charon; then, “Come with me, Son.”

Then I was kneeling over a stream, trying to see, but the water ran clouded with dirt. I touched my head, bleeding. Knuckles. Bleeding still. I moaned, begged not to be buried. The woman on the mountain was gone, replaced by a goat; only her bra remained, tangled in its horns. I stripped naked, threatened to jump in, even to drink from the stream.

They relented. It is my punishment to write for all eternity. If I finish one story, I must begin another. And if I refuse, as I have, they will send this to you, wherever you are, this fragment on a piece of driftwood carved by boar’s tooth. They talk excitedly of you, the Eternal Reader.

#### IV.

Time spreads anile legs. I must go on.

Dear Bert, I begin the letter carved from Mother’s persona.

*I haven’t heard a thing since that last text: “Mom, I stole a boat. Going away. Forgot my phone charger.” To which I replied, “Verizon has no battery life.” Bert, my little lap-dog...*

A poor, stupid attempt at nostalgic fiction that I would send to hell, if I could, but boar’s tooth on driftwood has no backspace. If I am Sisyphus, I must bring the boulder to the top of the mountain. I should lie under it; let it roll me over dead—I will have stopped the cycle.

*I woke under the cat’s shoulder. Wompus grew up fat, Bert, since you left. No more kitten.*

Good, good. “No more kitten.” That could resonate with those Italian-Roman-Greeks. Tears would do their ashen faces well. But I must go on.

*Bert, I am at a loss for what to write. If you end up reading this, which you probably won't, I don't know, I don't feel important like I used to, when I had you. The Mama, the Reader... what's my duty, Bert? What am I to you? Who do you write for and why?*

*My reply: Fossil Mother, mud hypocrite, you know I don't do it for you. How can you pretend to love me and I never loved you. You know what they want me to say: I am writing. All is well. Fondly, Bert.*

I stop. For good. When they ask me why, I will say, “I don't know. I don't know.”

## Erik Bendix

### Storm Warning

Bicycle spokes splay  
in eerie back porch silence,  
pointing all directions toward  
exit roads and black moist clouds.  
The view from spinning hubs twirls  
its chaos of asphalt and sky and legs  
pumping headlong into splats of rain  
that plummet through thick humid air  
and slap hard on gasping dusty ground.  
What hex-screws and oiled metal thread  
could secure my whirling soul in this  
brooding prairie built of chalk stone,  
ten thunders poised behind its corn,  
black beady eyes peering out behind  
knobbed and naked sycamore trunks,  
teeth clamped hard on squirrel nuts  
for quick stash and burial against  
the approaching black whipped  
roar of the spinning storms.

## Sara Uribe

cry

(Translated by Toshiya Kamei)

a hinge opens before my eyes like the muddy breathing of what is not an invention or a memory but a spell that dissolves the borders of my mirrors a stored rustle in the echo of years burns now in the throat of the corners on the servitude of the walls and the walls on the stiff dust of my doubts a sparkle that bursts in with its brazen light and everything destroys it and everything consumes it

grito

un gozne se abre frente a mi mirada como la turbia respiración de lo que no es ni invento ni recuerdo sino conjuro que disuelve las fronteras de mis espejos un crujido almacenado en el eco de los años arde ahora en la garganta de las esquinas en la servidumbre de las paredes y los muros en el polvo anquilosado de mis dudas un destello que irrumpe con su luz bronceína y todo

# Robert McGill

## Are You Guys with the Band?

It was the thing I'd feared most—after my *own* safety. I'd worried that when they came looking for their stolen contraband, they'd finger the wrong man and punish him for what I'd done. And now that fear appeared to have come true. Five chrome motorcycles were parked in a neat line at the side of the lonely dirt road, and the men who owned them—leather-jacketed thugs who drank blood and howled at the moon—were somewhere deep in the woods, going about their fiendish business.

I was the one who'd made off with their goods, not the old man. But that was hardly important now. What was important was that no matter what he told them, no matter how much he protested his innocence, they wouldn't believe him. Why? Because *everything* that came out of his whiskered old mouth was a lie—a complete and total fabrication that wilted and collapsed in the clear light of reason.

I'd met the old man the morning after I'd stolen the weed—several kilos worth that I'd stumbled across while walking my dog, Misty, in the woods near my home—and from the moment he invited me into his camp, I knew he was insane.

I found him sitting on a tattered lawn chair, warming his boots before the embers of a small fire. He was wearing a stained, sad-looking cowboy hat and faded bluejeans with tattered cuffs, and there was the look of a long, hard, dusty road about him.

“Sit down!” he called out when he saw me, welcoming me into his camp with an expansive gesture of his palm. “Take a load off!” Because I'd absconded with the weed under the cover of darkness (uprooting the crop by moonlight, and hauling it back to my home in heavy black garbage bags, which I later hid in the rafters of my garage), I assumed I'd be safe from suspicion. Still, on the outside chance he might be the crop's owner, I braced myself in the innocent manner of a man out on an early morning walk.

“You must be with the band,” he said as I took a seat on a log before fire.

“Band?”

He laughed and pointed to his filthy tee shirt. A human skull, wreathed in roses, grinned at me from the soiled fabric. “The band!”

I smiled, realizing that if this was the fellow who'd planted the crop, and I had nothing to worry about.

“Oh,” I said, playing along with a polite laugh. “The *band*.”

He nodded, and I saw that his face was scarred and lopsided, set off by an unflattering nose that seemed to travel in two directions at once. I saw, too, that his forehead sagged, heavily, at the intersection of his eyebrows, as if his mind were freighted with the memory of some grave and burdensome defeat.

“I was afraid you weren’t coming!” he said. “I’ve been here four days now!”

I acted as if I were grateful for whatever sacrifices he’d made to meet me here. He seemed sincerely happy to see me—pleased beyond words, if I can borrow that weary old phrase—but it was this far-too-cordial reception that convinced me he wasn’t all there. *Upstairs*.

“Four days!” I did my best to sound impressed. “That’s marvelous!” He shrugged, amicably, as if I might be going too far in my praise. But then, as if to fully engage me in the conspiracy that had brought him here, he leaned forward and, taking a guarded look over either shoulder, asked in a low whisper, “Where’s Emily, anyway?”

I paused before giving him my reply. I didn’t want to upset him. If he’d made camp here with the half-baked notion of meeting a member of the band, and finding some lost soul named Emily, why should it be me who dashed his hopes? After all, the only thing I cared about was whether or not he’d seen me skulking through the fields last night, and it was obvious—*painfully obvious*—that he hadn’t.

Watching as I struggled for words, he raised a dismissive hand and waved away the offending inquiry. “Never mind, never mind! We can get back to that in a minute! First things first!” He pointed a stained finger at the ring of blackened stones near his feet. “Can I interest you in some coffee? I make a righteous cup of coffee!”

I observed the tin pot, standing in the coals. Since I was here to prove to the world that I was an innocent man—a man with an unburdened conscience—what better way to demonstrate the depth of my virtue than to accept the old fool’s hospitality?

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

“Why not, indeed!” He laughed and threw up his hands. “If it’s there, grab it! That’s my philosophy!”

My dog, Misty, wandered over to his side and began running her nose across his boots in a great show of snuffling and snorting. I called her to heel, but she ignored me.

“It’s all right,” the old man said, extending his broad, flat hand, and demonstrating his ease with impromptu, canine introductions. “I love dogs and dogs love me!”

“She’s still young,” I offered, apologetically. “She likes having her way with strangers.”

The old man laughed. “Who doesn’t!”

He rose and went to the smoldering embers, and with three or four quick puffs of breath, coaxed them back to life.

“I wasn’t sure you’d ever get here,” he said, picking up a stick and fussing with the fire. “They told me you’d be here on Friday night, and when you didn’t show, I thought, *hell*.” He glanced over, blinking. A tincture of sadness clouded his eyes. “It’s been thirty years, my brother. Thirty long years since I’ve seen her. The man I bunked with over at the Mission told me I was crazy, that I should give it up. He said she was probably dead, or remarried. But I knew if I just kept looking, if I just kept moving my feet, I’d find her.”

He scavenged through his cook bag. “*Give it up!* Ha! I told that stupid bum I never gave up anything. Ever. I told him I never laid down for anyone. Not even where there was money on the line.”

He pulled a tin cup from the bag, holding it aloft for my approval. “Wah-lah!”

The coffee he made, which was instant, was remarkably good—doctored with a splash of evaporated milk and sweetened with brown sugar that he kept in an old tobacco tin—and he seemed pleased when, after my first sip, I brought the cup back to my lips and eagerly drank more.

“Good, yes?”

“Very good.”

I regarded the image of the flowery, mocking skull on his shirt. The Grateful Dead, so far as I knew, had given up the ghost years ago, and I wondered where he’d gotten the idea that they were still on tour. Or why he believed this woman, this *Emily* person, might be traveling with them.

“She’s a fan, is she?” I asked, pointing my cup at his chest. “A Dead-head?”

“Never misses a concert,” he said. “Ever. She told me that a long time ago. She always said, *‘Kid, you ever wanna find me, just head for the band’s next gig. That’s where I’ll be.’*”

Before I could look away, he trapped me in a somber stare. He said it was Emily who’d given him the shirt he was wearing, and that it was all he had left of her. He said she’d gone out for a pack of cigarettes one morning, and never come back. No goodbye note. No forwarding address. Nothing.

“So, when did you see her last?”

“A while,” he admitted. “A good while, now that I think about it.”

He leapt into a sudden crouch and cocked his fists, and snarling like a cat, ripped a couple of short, sharp punches in the air then staggered sideways as if he'd been surprised by a clever counterpunch.

"Like I told that bum at the Mission, I don't give up. I know she's close now—I can feel it—and this time nothing's getting in my way. I'm gonna find her and take her home with me."

His murky eyes seemed to lose their focus, as if they'd come unglued. He was still for a moment, and after a long silence he looked at me. "I need her, you know? *Bad.*"

"Yes," I said. "I understand."

I stood, slowly, and held out the cup, thanking him for the coffee. He took it and set it on the blackened stones, and told me I was welcome, no thanks necessary. "I'm good now," he said. "Now that I know I'm going to see her again."

We shook hands. His knuckles were large and misshapen, nicked with scar tissue. He asked me when I thought the rest of the band might show up, and I told him I wasn't sure. This evening, probably. I told him he should sit tight and stay where he was because Emily would no doubt be with them. It was harmless advice on my part. Or meant to be, anyway. But it didn't occur to me until that night, when I was in bed and half asleep, that my cavalier suggestion might have put the old bum in harm's way.

I trembled now as I made my way past the motorcycles and crept into the woods. My heart was thumping against my ribs. But for the old man's sake, I made myself go on. I didn't know what I could do for him, or whether I would do anything at all, but I knew I'd never be able to live with myself if I stood by and did nothing.

At first, there was only silence. The sound of the woods. But then the voices drifted up through the tangle of trees and branches, and the skin on my arms tightened, and cold beads of sweat prickled up from my brow. I pushed through the underbrush as quietly as I could, careful to put my feet down squarely and slowly with each step, even though there was no camouflaging the sound of the breaking twigs.

The voices grew louder as I approached the old timer's camp, but they were oddly calm, especially for a group of men who'd been cheated out of a pirate's chest in illegal drugs.

I heard two voices, neither of which was familiar to me, and for a moment I wondered if the cagey old bum had heard them coming and slipped off into the woods. The men were discussing something, and they seemed in no great hurry to resolve whatever it was that concerned them.

I stopped and crouched, putting my hands to the ground—dusting aside the broken twigs and rotting leaves—and lying prone on the damp,

smelly dirt. A clang erupted—metal on metal, something I couldn't make out—and I flinched, and the next thing I heard were feet moving through the grass. One of the men swore and another laughed, then two more began arguing. I pressed myself as low to the ground as I could and crept toward the edge of camp. I still hadn't heard the old man's voice, and I prayed to God I wouldn't. But then something happened. Out of nowhere, the sharp beams of two or three flashlights slashed open the dark.

The men wielding the electric torches were searching for something. Their drugs, most likely. But in the intermittent crossover of lights, I made out four additional figures, none of whom was the old man. There were two fellows in what looked to be leather vests, another in a leather jacket festooned with silver chains, and one man, very tall, in a top hat of some sort with what looked to be pheasant plumes stuck in the band. Still another man was standing further away, near the perimeter of the camp, leaning forward, his hand pressed against the trunk of a tree. The lights came and went, and there was no wind to disguise the sound, so I lay low and waited, biding my time.

"Fuck it," one of the men said eventually. "There's nothing here. A few bucks is all, and a shitty radio."

"What about in his pack?"

"Some books. Half a loaf of bread. Some canned food—fuckin' *dog* food. The shit must be hid somewhere."

They mumbled among themselves.

"Maybe he didn't do it."

"If he didn't," a man with a bearlike voice said, "he sure as shit knows who did."

The man who was next to the tree, stood back and said, "Is that right, daddy-o? You know who did it?"

One of the others directed the beam of his flashlight through the dark, cutting it squarely over the face of the man they were interrogating. The man was bound to the tree with rope and his face was bloodied.

I let out a gasp when I saw it was the old man, and the sound I made brought the flashlights down on me. But I didn't move. I planted my face to the damp, dirty earth and lay as still as I could, and after a long, terrifying moment the beams went away.

"Where'd you hide it," the man near the tree said.

A voice answered back, calmly. "I didn't."

"Who did?"

"I don't know."

A twig snapped.

"You don't talk much, do you?"

"I'm trying not to waste your time."

The biker crooked his arm and raised his flashlight to eye level, the way a cop would do, and spoke patiently, as if at the core of his being the only thing that mattered was to put this dilemma to rest.

“It isn’t just the money,” he said. “You understand that. It’s—“ he paused, struggling for the word. Turning to his companions, “What is it, Dean?”

“It’s the principle,” Dean answered from the darkness.

“Yeah. That’s it,” the interrogator agreed. “It’s the *principle* of the thing.” He walked over and stood before the man. Looked at him for a long time. “What’s your name, daddy-o?”

No one said a thing.

One of the other bikers chimed from the darkness, “His library card says his name’s Joseph.”

“Joe!” the biker said in a pleased voice. “That’s nice! Nice all American name.” He turned the light full on Joe’s face. “Now look, Joe. It’s like I said before. It’s the principle of the thing. It’s not just the stealing. That’s bad enough. It’s the disrespect. We don’t do that to one another here in America.” He thought for a moment then raised the palm of his free hand as if to ask for the old man’s assistance in this matter. “You didn’t help with the planting, so see, you have no place at the harvest table. Do I make myself clear?”

The old man said nothing.

“*Who will help us plant the weed?*” the interrogating biker asked, resurrecting some long forgotten storybook memory. “*Not I, said the Joe. Who will help us tend the weed? Not I, said the Joe. Who will help us smoke the weed? I will, said the Joe! I will!*” The biker’s voice deepened. “Do you see how inequitable that arrangement is, Joe?”

I heard the old man clear his throat. Then he spoke. “Are you with the band?”

The biker sighed and lowered the light from his face. “Rooster?” he held out his hand to the biker in the top hat. “Bring me the antidote, please.”

The fellow called Rooster took off his hat and reached into the crown, coming back with what appeared to a baggie. He handed the plastic sack to the interrogator.

“Open up,” the biker said.

The old man turned his head in refusal.

“Dean?” The interrogator looked to the biggest of the bikers, the fat bearded man who talked like a bear. “Would you come over here and persuade our friend, Joe, to open his mouth?” He turned to his right and spoke to the tall man in the top hat. “Keep the light on him, Rooster.”

The three of them moved in, like a dental team, and the big man pried open the old bum's jaw with a stick while the third man dipped his hand into the plastic bag that Rooster had given him and hauled up a fistful of something I couldn't see.

"You need to reflect on what you've done," the interrogating biker said, "and when you're done reflecting, you need to make restitution." He shoved his fist against the old man's mouth and his fingers went flat, gripping his whiskered jaw. The old bum choked and spat out part of whatever it was they'd forced him to eat, but then the big man, Dean, clamped his jaw shut and ran his hand up and down the old man's throat the way you do with a dog after you've given it medication.

"Maybe a little trip down memory lane will help you remember where the shit is," the man said. "Because, rest assured Joe, we'll be back. And the next time we see you, we'll expect answers." He stood back. "I have a tendency to overdue things when I get excited, Joe." He rolled his hand. "It's always been one of my failings. Boyish impetuosity. Still, if there's one thing a man can never get too much of"—here he turned and laughed—"besides maybe *pussy*, it's *acid*. So enjoy."

Are we done here?" one of the other bikers asked.

"Yeah," Rooster said, reseating his top hat with a careful gesture that required the use of both hands. "We're done."

They all gathered in front of the tree.

"In a little while," the main interrogator said, "you won't know whether this was a real or a nightmare. So I want to remind you, here and now, that it's both." Reaching behind his back, he drew up a knife from his belt. A broad, flat Bowie knife. "Justice demands to be done here, Joe. As good Americans, we can't accept anything less."

I started to rise from my hiding place, to run at them while their backs were turned and confess my culpability in the matter. But fear had turned my legs to stone.

The interrogator tore open the old man's tee shirt, rending the grinning skull in two, and drew the knife across the middle of his wheezy, old man's chest, first one way then the other. The old man grunted, looking away, grimacing as the punishment was administered.

"The past is real, man," the biker said, poking the old man's bleeding chest with his finger. "When you think the bad dream is over, look down and remember this, and know that we're coming back."

He wiped the blood from the knife on the remnants of the old man's tee-shirt then reached behind his back and returned the weapon to its sheath. "Let's go," he growled to the others. "The woods at night always give me the creeps."

They turned to leave, and it was only then that I realized I was lying in their path. But there was nowhere to go without giving away my position, so I buried my face in the wet, moldy ground and waited, praying to God they wouldn't discover me.

One by one they tramped back through the underbrush, cursing the branches that barred their way. And out of all probability, I was never discovered. In a little while their footsteps ceased, and not long after that, the brief rumbling of their four-strokes gave way to the silence of the night.

"It's me!" I whispered, leaping up from the muddy forest floor when they were gone and running to the old man's side. "Don't worry. It's going to be all right."

The old man raised his head and I could see the swelling under his eye, and a small cut on the cheek. The blood on his face seemed to come from a small cut near his hairline, though I couldn't be sure in the dark. He was shivering, twitching, and I stepped behind the tree trunk to undo the knots binding his wrists.

"Are you with the band?"

"No."

"Where's Emily?"

"I don't know."

Despite my feeble, shaking hands, the rope that held him to the tree came undone, dropping to his feet in a tangle. He swayed a little, but when I went to steady him he pushed my hands away and stared into the woods.

"Where's Emily?"

"I need to take you to the hospital," I said.

"*No!*" He drove a look into me that felt like a rusty spike.

"But you're hurt."

He raised his hand to his face and walked his fingers around the bruise, then he looked down and ripped open what was left of his tee shirt, the "x" over his sternum running with thin, black rivulets of blood. "I'm not hurt," he said in a voice so calm it was eerie. "I'm only *angry*."

I took his arm and tugged him over to the log I'd sat on just that morning, and told him to rest. But he wouldn't hear of it. The only thing he wanted to do was find Emily.

"Listen to me," I said. "I think they poisoned you."

"I'm all right."

"I'm worried," I said. "I'm afraid you might get sick."

A grin split his face, turning his smile into a devil mask. His eyes went wide and terrible. "It's *them* who better worry."

The bikers must have shoved fifty hits of acid into his mouth, god help him, and all I could do was shudder, imagining what would happen when the drug overtook him—when the voices the chemical began mixing with the voices that were already in his head.

“This isn’t good,” I said. “It could kill you.”

“No,” he said slyly. “It’s going to make me *stronger*.”

I took his arm, hoping to lead him away to the road where I could get him into my car and drive him to the hospital. But he tore loose from my grip, and sat down, tailorwise, in the grass.

“I need to think.”

“*Think?*”

“Yes.”

“About what for god’s sake?”

“*Things.*”

I crouched and looked into his eyes, but it was too dark to read his pupils. Or rather, his pupils had dilated so horribly, there was nothing to read but a giant pool of black ink.

“You sure you’re not hurt?”

“I feel fine.”

I looked at him and laughed, not meaning to. Then he laughed, too. “Come on,” I said, taking him by the arm. “Let’s go. Before they decide to come back.

“Oh, they will come back,” he said. “But not until tomorrow.”

“How do you know?”

“The acid says so.”

I looked down at him, then into the deep, unrelenting blackness of the woods. I was shaking like a man pulled from icy waters. “Come with me,” I pleaded.

“No. Not without Emily.”

“Please?”

“No.”

He sat there in the grass, his eyes orbiting in their sockets. Then he began to laugh. The cackle that came from him was chilling, something from a horror film, a barking, coughing laugh that made it sound as if he were trying to swallow his own head.

“You’re lucky they didn’t kill you,” I muttered.

“They’re lucky I didn’t kill them,” he said, picking up the rope they’d used to tie him to the tree. His eyes fell to the coiled ligature. “The next time we see each other, they won’t be so lucky.”

I stayed by the old man’s side till just before dawn. But despite my repeated offers to take him to the hospital, he refused to leave.

“They’re coming,” he kept saying, twisting the rope in his hand, “and if they don’t bring Emily this time, I’m going to strangle them, one by one, and eat their brains.”

I was afraid to touch him. But I was afraid to stay, too, because I knew he was right. The bikers were certain to return. They might already have been on their way.

I looked at him. Eyes like saucers. Fists clenched. “I have to leave,” I said. “Do you understand?”

He said nothing, nor did he make any move to stop me. He just sat there.

I stood and dusted myself off. I’d decided to drive home, load the stolen weed in the car, bring it back here to the campsite and dump it near the fire ring. If the men in the leather jackets returned maybe it would settle things. If they didn’t bring Emily, maybe it wouldn’t.

# Dan Pinkerton

## The Helmet of Breezy Proclamations

The Helmet of Breezy Proclamations  
Steve bought on a whim at an antique mall  
came in handy when he encountered,  
while purchasing condoms at the all-night grocery,  
his recent ex, who was boggled by  
the striking sheen of Steve's helmet, dismayed  
that in the wake of their relationship  
her former paramour now frequented antique  
malls and all-night groceries and had made  
such a stirring revision to his appearance  
as to affect a Helmet of Breezy  
Proclamations when she had merely, post-  
breakup, bought a secondhand Fendi handbag.

Plus, in her cart (it should be noted)  
were cans of gourmet cat food, not to mention  
the helmet started making breezy  
proclamations, e.g. One must never  
wear white after Labor Day. Later Steve  
took down the helmet, with its horns and rotting  
feathers, to give it a thorough cleansing.

The helmet may have been alive at one  
time, and maybe, the new girlfriend pointed  
out, maybe it still was. Maybe it struggled  
a bit in Steve's hands, and maybe he beat it  
nearly insensate with a meat tenderizer  
before remembering the fishsticks  
blackening in the oven. The playoffs  
were on. Bodies were making spirited  
love to themselves, to each other, to ice,  
Zambonis, whatever surface offered  
itself for the nuzzling. And the helmets  
of the wingmen were extraordinary.

# Stuart Chittenden

## Damp Veneers

Damp veneers spill the warmed cream  
Of sun foaming in each sea green  
Carpet frond, where lace curtain lilies  
Float instead of my father,  
This morning zippered black.

Duck Kerfuffle

Simon Bay Otter had never before heard the expression "...like being nibbled to death by ducks," but Dear Lord, he knew what it felt like. Kicking at the white feathers, one shiny patent leather shoe flew off, and after making an impressive somersault dove down, down, down into the lake. His left shoe. His best shoe. "Help me!" he cried.

"What's the kerfuffle?" Daisy said to May, holding out her ice cream cone.

Taking it in her long fingered hand, May licked lightly at the vanilla. "The what?"

"Kerfuffle." Daisy narrowed her eyes in the sun, looking out over the shining water. "There's some kind of commotion.

"Commotion, sure," May shrugged. "But I don't know anything about this kerfuffle."

"It's an expression."

"An expression?"

"Well, a word."

May frowned, nose wrinkling. "One word does not an expression make."

"No," Daisy said. "No," she said again, raising her voice to be heard over the nearby shouting. "It doesn't, I suppose."

"If we just went around saying one word and expecting everyone to understand our intention, it would be a confusing world indeed."

"Yes," Daisy agreed. She wished she had never spoken.

"That man," May said, pointing. "That's the commotion. Maybe kerfuffle-- I couldn't say-- but definitely commotion."

"They mean the same really."

"Do you see him?"

"What?"

"Who."

"What?"

"Who," May said, ice cream dripping. "It's a who. A man. The one by the lake."

"Is there?" Daisy said. She wished she had used some other word. Both times.

"There is," May said, watching Simon Bay Otter throw clumps of grass at the flock of furiously flitting ducks. "Just one." Simon hurled his

right shoe, sending feathers and himself tumbling into the lake. “Quite a commotion indeed.” Two socked feet lay on the shore, pulled up and down by angry beaks. “It seems he’s being nibbled to death by ducks.”

“Aren’t we all,” Daisy said.

# Brian Castleberry

## Nemerov's Wife

The trouble began the morning the sun didn't rise. It was on that morning Bea, having only returned from a conference in New York a few days prior to find the humble Midwestern college town we called home even more humble and Midwestern than when she'd left and to find myself changed only in a few days' growth around the jaw, decided she'd had enough. "This relationship," she said, "is over." By relationship, she meant our marriage of six years. And by the sun not rising, I mean that of course it had risen, but the incredible dark of a looming storm had curtained its light from us so that dawn looked as dusk, and I had already toyed with the idea of canceling classes and getting back into bed.

"That's an awful thing to say," I told her. I stood in the hall blowing over the top of my coffee, mildly preoccupied with the impending inconvenience of lecturing for an hour and a half on Wordsworth and Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads while rain pelted the classroom windows, only considering the fact that my wife would be at home plotting divorce as a sort of added negative, a surplus of badness. "Anyway I don't understand the problem. What's at issue, here?"

Bea pulled a series of stretched faces as she applied lotion to her forehead, cheeks, and neck. Then she turned, still a bit glossy, and said, "That's exactly the problem, Pete. You don't even know there is a problem."

I responded to this declaration by sipping my coffee and then letting out a husky, though noncommittal, harrumph. "We don't live in a movie, Bea," I said over my shoulder, and continued down the hall.

She, in turn, closed the bathroom door. In the living room a balding weatherman explained to me that a recent shift in Pacific water temperatures combined with a cold front moving down the east coast had created the current darkness, the roiling thunder, the certain threat of torrential rain—all of which, according to the screen superimposed behind him, swirled in a continental blob between the nation's core pair of mountain ranges. I sat on the couch and blew again at my coffee. When Bea crossed the room in her raincoat, carrying the umbrella we'd purchased years ago when we were caught in the rain in a strange city, breathless and in love, I was momentarily overcome by divergent emotions which left me in stunned silence. On the one hand, her bare legs protruding from the long beige fabric of the raincoat filled my mind with boyish, vaguely

pornographic fantasies. On the other hand, something akin to defeat rang emptily against the walls of a chasm I found suddenly to be opening within me. I very nearly cried. Bea, however, slowed her movements only enough to unlock the door and swing it open. From the shared hall of our apartment building, she turned to say without emotion, "I won't be staying here this evening."

I won't be staying here this evening! As if this were a hotel and I a careless manager: No one had turned the sheets or brought clean towels. The wake-up call had come late. A pimple-faced bellboy had hit on her in the elevator. She simply won't be staying here this evening. Please send her bags to the Holiday Inn.

Dumbfounded but incredulous, I went about my day as if the remark hadn't been passed. I spoke at length about the avant-garde nature of the Ballads' manifesto-like introduction, the radical colloquialism of Goody Blake and Harry Gill, the ever-present influence of Charlotte Smith and Robert Burns and the French Revolution throughout the poems. In the afternoon, I attended a tenure and faculty development meeting that dragged on interminably. I met with a snotty know-it-all student concerning a possible independent study on the life and work of Lord Byron. All the while, that grave darkness hung in the sky. The rain didn't come. Wind battered my office window. The clouds turned in purple and dust-colored sublimity. We all clung to the precipice. Around four o'clock, I packed up my books and notes and made my way slowly, meanderingly, to the faculty parking lot. The air smelled of stale water. My tie flapped violently in the wind. Wayne Jacobson, a Milton scholar with a stout, pig-like countenance, pulled alongside me in his flashy European sports car. "Looks like shit out here, huh, Pete?"

"Yes," I said.

"Where you off to, buddy?"

"Home." Now in view of the Toyota, I began nervously pressing the unlock button on my electronic key. I watched with anticipation as the headlights silently flashed their response.

Meanwhile, Jacobson kept pace. "Think you could stand a drink?"

I told him I couldn't, that I had papers to grade, research to finish, that Bea and I were planning to go to the gym before dinner. But Jacobson deflected these flimsy lies and retorted again and again with a short, authoritative, "C'mon," so that only a handful of seconds later I found myself grasping the low-slung door handle of the tiny car, trying to remain in the passenger seat as Jacobson revved around corners, showing off for undergraduate girls who were far less than half his age and held little interest in his passion for epic poetry, his functional alcoholism, or his projectile halitosis. By the time we arrived outside a downtown bar, I

was uncertain on my feet, the victim of a mild state of shock. This sensation magnified in intensity when we entered the dark, smoky interior of the place, and so I stumbled about, trying my best to follow Jacobson in a straight line to the corner booth he called home. I'd drank with him there on many occasions, and found the worn, blemished wood of its bench and table somewhat comforting in the face of the impending storm.

Jacobson wears a hat. A battered thing that had once been the style for American men in the middle of the last century. Indoors, unless teaching a class, he doesn't bother removing the hat but instead only tilts it so far back on his head that it resembles an oversized yarmulke. Along with his bowtie and breastpocket full of pens, it is part of a uniform that reminds me of sports reporters in old movies, the type of men who bolt to a phone when the champ is unexpectedly knocked out. He's the overly gregarious type who orders your drink for you, and did so now even before the waiter—a pimply kid with pointy black hair who'd been a student of mine a couple of years back but rarely shown up for class—could mumble out his greeting.

A minute or two later we were looking at shots of cheap whiskey and matching pints of English ale and Jacobson was going on about this sophomore wunderkind who's running circles around her fellow students in his Early Modern British Poetry class. She's not only ridiculously intelligent, of course, but also a ravishing beauty. "In that fuckable librarian kind of way," he says just as I lift my whiskey up to meet his. "God," he growls, "and what a fucking flirt she is!"

We toast. The whiskey is disgusting. We're much too old for this sort of behavior, and I've known it for about a decade, since before I received tenure, before Bea and I were married, before Jacobson came to our school with his sullied moral reputation and rank as the second- or third-most-important Milton scholar on the planet. "Well," I say, scrambling to down some of the ale before my throat bursts in agony, "you'd better stay away from her."

"Stay away from her?" Jacobson gives me a vaudevillian look of injury and then sets down his shot glass with nimble fingers. "Pete I'm likely to be performing oral surgery on her the way this fucking semester is going."

I wince at the likely meaning of his distorted metaphor. "Man, I'm telling you. Stay away from the girl."

Leaning over the table toward me, he produces his phone. "She gave me her phone number. I mean I didn't even ask. It's right here." He scrolls through the numbers, then taps one. The screen reads: Calling... and I look away in horror. "Yes? Katy? This is uh, this is Professor Jacobson. I'm having a drink with an esteemed colleague of mine who expressed

interest in meeting such a devoted student of the tongue,” here he winks, making the whole thing appear even more sordid than it already is, “and I wondered if you wouldn’t like to meet us.”

“No,” I whisper. “Leave me out of this.”

“Very well. We’ll see you in a few minutes.”

I look at my watch. It’s nearly five and if I down this beer and lay out a few dollars for my side of the tip, I can make it back to the car and home in half an hour. “I’m going to go,” I say as he slides his phone back in the worn leather satchel at his side. “I don’t want to have anything to do with this.”

“Oh, get off it, Pete. You’d have me believe there’s something unnatural about a man’s physical needs?” I tell him that yes, there is something unnatural about a man’s needs when it means risking his job and credibility only to take advantage of some intellectual-struck tween. “Tween! Goddamnit, man, you sound like a fucking pornographer. This is the real world. The flesh and the blood. Do you expect me to go quietly? For what? I’m an old alcoholic. A dying man, likely. Obsessed by a single poem written by a blind Christian. A poem I happen to find reprehensibly dull, I might add. A bore. Bringing in my deconstruction this and new historicism that and all the while the fucking thing doesn’t change a bit. I’ve got the thing memorized, Pete. I could recite it for you now—“

“I wish you would,” I interrupt, “instead of dragging that poor girl into your cesspool.”

“Cesspool, Pete? As if you don’t know what it’s like to have a cesspool? As if we aren’t all men our own walking fucking cesspools of filth and fantasy? As if this whole society-act isn’t just a way to impress women and convince them we aren’t cesspools?”

I look at my watch again. Almost no time at all has passed. “You’re a fine nihilist when you want to be. But that doesn’t change matters. I’ve got to be home anyway.”

Jacobson tips back his pint of beer and finishes it off with a series of steely-eyed gulps. When he sets down the pint, he looks sullen. “You’ve just got to stay. What would it look like if I were alone, waiting for her?”

“About the same as if you weren’t alone. Creepy, and ethically questionable.”

“And the storm? Are you just going to walk in the storm?”

I glance back at the open door of the bar. It’s still dark gray out there, almost black. Torn newspaper and cigarette packs swirl in the wind. I think of leaning into that wind, the rain streaming down at once just as I get halfway to campus, of slogging in the door only to face another argument with Bea. “Okay,” I tell him. “But only for one drink. Then we all leave.”

Jacobson slaps the table. “That’s the Pete I know.”

There is a rather famous poem of Wordsworth’s titled “Expostulation and Reply,” which, likely, you’ve read at some point in your life whether you know it or not. The premise is that a fellow of William’s is trying to convince him to stay in and study rather than go out and enjoy the world outside. Of course, the squabble ends in Wordsworth’s, and Nature’s, favor—a victory fated by the uneven deck of the author’s hand. Still, I am reminded of this poem and its companion, “The Tables Turned,” as I await the uncomfortable arrival of Jacobson’s sophomore and compare that looming intrigue to the more studious and marital behavior I’d had planned for the evening. I feel, even as Jacobson flags down the waiter for another round, that I have made an unnecessary misstep and that all that proceeds from this moment will be of a decidedly different aspect had I simply braved the weather and gone home. Perhaps Wordsworth had been wrong (it wasn’t a new thought—especially considering some of the butchery he put his early poems through in his later, editorial life) about Nature, at least man’s nature. At least the type of nature Jacobson subscribed to. This was no English countryside, after all, and the chance of gaining insight on the pantheistic being believed to be present there was slim to none.

These thoughts fogged my brain right up until a tiny sheaf of a girl blew past our booth, twirled jerkily, and then produced herself before us with both hands out like a late night comedian kicking off the evening’s monologue. “Professor Jacobson,” she said in a surprised-sounding, rather birdish voice. “I almost didn’t see you.”

“Katy!” Jacobson stuffed his satchel under the table where it fell on my left foot. He looked at her with an unashamed passion, and all of a sudden I knew that this wasn’t the first time teacher and student had spent time together outside the classroom. “Have a seat, please. This is Peter Nemerov.”

“Pleased,” said Katy. She extended a hand and we shook. Her fingers were long and slim, slightly cold, with an oiliness to them that belied the recent application of lotion. She was an undeniably attractive young woman, with dark hair in a ponytail and the sort of elongated, fragile features often seen giving placid looks in makeup ads or stalking down runways in conceptual attire. She was tall and slender and gracefully took her seat next to Jacobson without disturbing our momentary embrace. “You teach nineteenth century lit, right?”

“Yes,” I said. “British. Romantic and Victorian.”

She looked me in the eyes with a mix of excitement and obeisance, the way a small child watches public television cartoons. “That’s such a fascinating period.”

I try to make small talk but can tell by the way the satchel jostles over my foot that the two of them are engaged in an entirely different conversation beneath the table. A number of times, I mention that I should get going. But the hint doesn't land. Jacobson orders another round, then another, and after a time I surrender to a certain level of inebriated reverie, by which time we're all three in a convoluted, likely meaningless debate on the merits of Alexander Pope. Finally, before any sense can be made of our various positions on the subject, Katy's phone rings and she bids a swift adieu. Jacobson, looking hangdog and silly, escorts her to the door. I do not turn back to see if they exchange anything more than professional pleasantries. When he returns, he is looking vibrant and alive. "Well," he growls. "How's that for living, huh?" We stay for one more beer and then stagger forth, complaining of hunger and women and books we'd never gotten around to reading. Then we are speeding around corners. We arrive at a pizza-by-the-slice place and suddenly I am inside, wobbling over the glass, ordering two pieces of cheese-and-mushroom and asking the woman behind the counter if they serve beer. They don't.

Jacobson drops me off at my apartment and I am halfway up the stairs before I realize I'd left my car on campus and would have to get a ride from Bea in the morning. Bea! The thought of walking inside and facing her in this condition makes my stomach turn. I sit in the stairwell outside our door and try to come up with an excuse either for my behavior or for running far, far away from this place and never returning. But I come up with nothing. I toy with the key and the lock and then rush inside, nearly tripping over the coffee table which seems to have moved much closer to the door than I remembered. I scan the room and then call out her name. No answer. I check the other rooms. In the kitchen, next to the sink, scrawled on the pad we use to write our grocery lists, is this simple note:

I'm finished, Pete. You and I both know it isn't love anymore. XO,  
Beatrice.

The sight of that reckless XO fills me with a despair beyond words and I puke in nasty heaves against the dishes filling the sink.

I wake to the bright incandescence of the living room light fixture. Four bulbs in all stare down upon my prostrate form. A couch cushion has made its way under my head. The coffee table, troublesome to me as I had entered, is now housed in the far corner of the room, next to the bookcases. I stare for a while at the spine of *The Collected Poetry of John Donne* until the padding of bare feet draws my attention to the open bedroom door. Out walks a slender nude Katy. Her body is a pale skeleton presenting a black pad of curled hair before her. Arms wagging at her sides, she does nothing to shame her exposure. She doesn't see that

my eyes are open, so I close them. Sheathed beneath the blood-colored hood of my eyelids, I become distinctly aware of the ridiculous pain my entire body is in. I listen to her footsteps as she crosses the room, rustles through a bag near my feet, then retreats. A moment later, the shower squeaks to a start.

In the kitchen, I search for Bea's note. I look down at the caked-on vomit pinking the dishes in the sink and feel overcome with a sharp hunger. In the trashcan, next to a curled orange rind speckled by coffee grinds, Bea's note is discovered. I pull the wad of lined paper from the garbage and set it on the counter. Carefully, I unfold its myriad creases and unwrinkle its various planes until something resembling a flat sheet is produced. I read it again. It is at this time that I regard the window to my right, where the same darkening storm still roils above, blocking out the sun. Certainly, I think, this is a very unnatural occurrence.

On the television, I discover the Weather Channel to have been replaced by a glowing blue screen with a single message typed in yellow at its center. The font of the message strikes me as particularly pre-internet age, the kind of computerized lettering used to write code in the eighties. It reads: Please contact your service provider. I switch the channel to CNN. The same. Fox News. Ditto. I shut the machine off and stalk to the bedroom to confront Jacobson.

Jacobson, however, is not present. No longer present. A pair of repugnant, hole-worn brown dress socks lay in twin piles at the foot of my bed like the waste of an uncurbed dog. I resolve to leave these where they lay, and return to the kitchen to inspect the contents of the refrigerator. There is nothing to eat, but in the freezer I find a bottle of the very brand of cheap whiskey synonymous with Jacobson's iron stomach, and splash a bit into a cup of grape juice. I slosh this down with considerable effort, take my phone from the counter's edge, and dial Jacobson's number.

"I don't know what this," I say, "girl is doing here. And I don't know where you've gotten off to. For Christ's sake I don't even remember you two coming over. So, whenever you get out of your class, or whatever it is you're doing. If you don't mind calling, um, it would be appreciated."

As I say all this, I am staring out the window at the rolling gray-purple sky. In the world of the Tanakh, or Old Testament, the sky is a dome separating another body of water from the surface of the earth. My mind goes to this conception as I watch the domelike clouds encapsulating our city. Perhaps, I think, there is nothing beyond the horizon after all. We are trapped here, display items at a science fair, beneath the foggy glass of a curved roof. I set the phone on the window ledge and conclude that nothing worse has ever become of my life.

Careless of the effect it will have on Katy's shower, I run water in the kitchen tap and splash it against my face, run wet fingers through my hair. A moment later I am in the stairwell, rushing downwards, circling sickly toward the ground. Imagine my shock upon discovering the presence of my Toyota (white, reflecting the dark movements above) in the first space, near the back door of the apartment building. I check the keys to be sure it isn't an impostor, and feel an electric flutter pass through my intestines at the sight of its blinking headlights. How had it come to be here? But then again, why had I even come down to meet it? Apparently some very dull recollection of its transport home still survived in my memory. Setting these inner debates aside, I drive across town sloppily, like a man half-asleep. I ease past stop signs. Run out of patience before red lights. Speed through residential zones with little respect for linearity.

On campus, I jangle keys and thrust myself behind the sanctity of my office door. Surrounded by the ceiling-high bookshelves, their contents arranged by date of publication, I feel for the first time in two days absolutely safe, and very nearly reach for a volume of Shelley to accompany this sensation of sudden and unassailable comfort when, to my terror, a knock comes to the door. "Dr. Nemerov? I've got a message for you, Dr. Nemerov."

I take a number of slow breaths, hoping to convince myself that I could ignore this interruption to my momentary peace. Outside the window behind me, the darkness only seems to grow.

"Dr. Nemerov?"

"Yes," I say. "Come in."

It was the overachieving graduate student who, for little more than minimum wage, had chosen to castigate himself by assisting in the English department office. "From Professor Jacobson, sir. He would greatly appreciate it if you could substitute in his afternoon Early Modern class, Professor Nemerov."

I scratch kindly at my beard, faking an itch. "Yes," I tell the young man. "I can do this."

The class met in the basement of a former gymnasium, in a wide, fanning theater room which I doubted would fill when I arrived fifteen minutes early. But it did. Likely a hundred and fifty students. And as I explained the absence of Dr. Jacobson and my own relative lack of knowledge of the subject to the students, the most astonishing episode of the affair which I relate occurred, rather suddenly, without the narrative intrusion of the announcement I now grant its occasion. Bea, my wife, the woman I loved and who I had lived alongside with eggshells these last several months, since the miscarriage, clacked her heels down the ramp

between rows and found a seat close enough to look me clearly in the eyes. She smiled, rather coquettishly, and a tremble shook my hands.

The class proceeded in the best way possible: I elucidated the assigned reading with whatever memories still served me of my own education in the subject, allowing them at thirty-eight minutes after the hour to vacate the premises, only half-lectured, a combination of partialities that left only Bea—out of who-knows-how-many-students—to approach the lectern as the rest filed outward. “Beatrice,” I said as she came close. “I am so sorry. My head has been a mess. I love you.”

Bea stopped, one foot upon the stage where I stood. Her face appeared aghast. “Professor Nemerov!” She stepped backward, creeping, as if she’d been caught at something or caught someone else. “You’re scaring me.”

You’re scaring me! That’s what she had the gumption to say. As if all that had passed between us over these many years was something devoid of emotion, something people didn’t fight over, something that wasn’t of desperate and obscure value compared with the world around us. Of course, I stretch out both my hands, “Bea, please. I’m the one to blame for these things. I love you. I’ll do anything to fix it.”

To which Bea responds by turning with a sudden jerk and running from the classroom.

At home, I find Katy making vegetarian Hamburger Helper on the gas stovetop. “What are you still doing here?” I ask.

“Jesus, Peter,” she said, clothed now, in a recognizable sweater of Bea’s and worn blue jeans, “I thought we still had something to talk about.”

Terror weakened my voice. “What do we have to talk about?”

“Our marriage, for one.”

I watched her, this dark-haired skeleton active in my kitchen, and determined rather quickly that something very radical had affected my eyes, or my internal perceptions. I was talking to Bea. But at the same time, I was talking to Katy, Jacobson’s undergraduate. Whatever the problem, I determined the best reaction would be to turn away, assert ignorance, and create an excuse to present myself in public, post-haste, preferably in the companionship of Wayne Jacobson. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I thought you had plans. Wouldn’t have called old Jacobson to meet tonight if I’d remembered.”

“So you’ve got to go?” I looked at her, naked in spite of her clothes, and nodded, slowly, with doubt. “Well, okay,” she said. Her voice sounded so painfully weak and timorous. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I called Jacobson on the way across town, explaining to him that we had to meet immediately, in private. He suggested the same bar where we’d been the night before. When I arrived the place was empty save

for a urine-smelling old drunk someone had once told me was a former professor of art history at the university. I took our usual booth and had finished off two pints of beer, drinking out of fear more than thirst, before Jacobson walked through the door. He held the left side of his jaw in his hand and grumbled something about a toothache and what a swell friend I was for covering his class for him this afternoon. “Undo whatever the hell you did,” I told him.

Jacobson stared across the table, incredulous and slightly miffed. “What?”

“This trick of yours. With the student. I found your socks, okay? So the joke’s over. Just pick up the girl and tell Bea to come home and we’ll call it a laugh.”

Neither of us spoke for a while. I stared at him, watching each faint gesture of his face, reading his movements as he ordered his whiskey and beer, expecting recognition to accidentally surface through this façade of ignorance. But nothing came. He took his shot, gulped down some of his beer. All the while, he met my eyes, possibly thinking thoughts much like my own, until finally, without emotion, he said, “My socks, Peter?”

“Brown dress socks. A pair of them. At the foot of my bed.”

He squinted as if looking through smoke. “I don’t own a pair of brown dress socks,” he said. “Argyle, yes. Black. But no brown.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“My ex-wife was always nagging me about matching my pants with my socks. Trust me, I don’t own any brown socks.”

I told him it didn’t matter. I told him that the student he’d been lust-ing after was now back at my apartment, cooking in my wife’s clothes, and living under the impression she belonged there. I told him that my wife, for her part, had shown up in Jacobson’s class pretending to be a student and putting on a rather convincing show of having no idea who I was. I told him I wanted it to stop. Jacobson considered these statements with growing perturbation, transforming over the course of my monologue to a bug-eyed, slack-jawed mannequin. From his throat emanated a quiet low hum. Behind him, without warning, the storm broke all at once. Through the doorway, the rain appeared like a series of silver curtains, blocking out view of the street. The hushing sound filled my ears. The air, musty and clean at once, moved through the once-still bar. The drunk slipped off his stool, ambled over to the tinted window, and chewed on his bottom lip. I looked back at Jacobson. “Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

He averted his eyes. “Did I tell you I went to the dentist? They’re saying I’m going to need a root canal.” He pointed at his jaw. “Do you know what a root canal is, Pete?”

“I know what a fucking root canal is, Wayne. What I don’t know is what the hell you people are trying to prove with this joke—”

Jacobson slammed his palm on the table so hard that his shot glass tumbled over. I watched it roll to the edge of the table and fall. Even from my angle, shards of glass could be seen flying out from the impact. “This is not a joke. Life is not a joke, Professor Nemerov. This is the real thing. Like Coca-Cola. Like flesh and blood. You can’t just go on denying what’s here and now.” The waiter rushed over with a dustpan and broom, irrationally apologizing for something he had nothing to do with. Jacobson ignored his presence and went on. “Your problem is that you’re just like the rest of these people. Believing in your fantasy reading of the world. You might as well study the fucking Bible! Or television! Why don’t you tell me now how upset you are that you didn’t win Wheel of Fortune this afternoon? Why don’t you regurgitate something you heard on the evening news? Quote to me from Leviticus, Professor. Or ESPN. But don’t whine about what’s happened. You finally get a little bit of the living in you and what do you do? Run from it? Run shouting like a madman? Run to the forgiving bosom of dear old Jacobson? Pshaw! Shit and pshaw! You live like a man with a bag over his head.”

To this, there was little I could say. “But my wife—”

“She was never your wife! She was never anything. Nothing has ever been different from today. It’s always been like this. Don’t you see? You’ve gone overboard. You’re delusional. Hallucinogenic. Nothing’s changed anywhere ever and the woman that’s at home in your wife’s clothes is the same woman who was always in those clothes.” Across the floor, stretching past the drunk, connecting the open door to the kneeling waiter still sweeping up broken glass, a rivulet of water flows, branches off, hastens its ubiquity. Jacobson continues, “Is that what you want to hear from me? That you’re nuts? That you’ve lost your fucking mind? Because I can tell you that if that’s what you want to hear. It’s no skin off my back—”

I pardon myself from the table. Jacobson is still shouting at me as I splash toward the door. I reach the rain, feel its unexpected force against me, its thick chilling weight, but plow forward. In the car, the radio hardly works. Occasionally I hear the voice of a weatherman garbling out phrases, but these mix with a familiar arena rock song from the seventies. The rain drastically impedes my vision. I am stuck in traffic on and off for what feels like an hour. Cars and trucks are wrecked at the side of the road, their drivers standing under umbrellas, waiting for the arrival of police or ambulance. The road itself appears to be flooding, its drains clogged with refuse. I park outside the apartment building and stare up at a lit window, pretending to see the shadow of my wife or her replacement moving past, frantically pacing, but in truth I see no one. Only the light. After a while I

work up the courage to run through the storm again. Dripping, sloshing, I slowly ascend the staircase, turn the key, and then enter my home. In the kitchen I discover a note identical to the original in every way. I wonder if Katy had signed Bea's name to it, if Katy had ever been here at all, if this wasn't itself the original. In the trashcan, the mystery is half-answered: enthroned upon a pillar of coffee grounds, the wadded note accepts my remorseful gaze for a full minute. Only then do I remove it again, flatten it out, and set it alongside its brother. The handwriting is identical.

An hour later, a woman calls. She asks that I meet her at a hotel near the interstate. Room 305. I reluctantly agree to this. By now the streets are impossible to navigate. I drive ten, sometimes only five miles an hour along abandoned roads bumper-deep in water. Occasionally, the Toyota slides with the flow of the water, apparently taken up, adrift. Then just as quickly I am back in control.

The hotel appears to have become a makeshift refuge for drivers from the highway. The lobby is crowded with drenched families, their children tapping various electronic devices, everyone murmuring clichés about the unpredictability of the skies. Here and there, dogs caper about freely. A group of truckers smoke cigarettes near a television, disregarding the law. A pale wide-eyed man in a fishing hat rants about the Lord. I shuffle past him to the elevator.

The door to room 305 is held slightly ajar by a familiar-looking housewife. Inside I find a slightly pudgy woman, a typical suburban housewife, perhaps in her mid to late fifties. She wears an unfashionable flower-print vest and lime green capris. White sandals dangle from her feet. She is sniffing back tears and wiping a handful of tissues across her eyes as I enter. "Excuse me?" I say. "I'm Peter Nemerov. I received a call about an hour ago."

The woman looks up at me with a mix of sorrow and horror. Then she buries her face in her hands, sobbing. On the television before her, a flashy game show plays as if nothing is happening, as if the world isn't coming to its end. I stand just inside the door, the witnessing stranger. I feel miserably out of place and consider running from the room, taking the stairs, hiding among the wet throng at ground level. Just as I take a step back, however, the woman jerks up her head. "Peter?" she says. "You don't even touch me anymore."

I step forward and then lean against the entryway wall, next to the open bathroom door, and listen to the woman as she tells me her name is Beatrice, that we'd met eight years ago in my Intro to Lit course, that the semester hadn't even come to its close before we were lovers. She claims we were married two years later, when she was a senior, in a rushed wedding we both assumed to be a necessary evil at the time, considering her

pregnancy, which only a few months later ended in a miscarriage that dragged us both through the coals of depression. We had resolved then not to try to have children, though she'd always held the decision against me, and now she says—with the shakiness of someone confessing her most evil sin—that though she felt she was too modern to admit it until recently, she is certain that the hasty, unemotional way the two of us had determined the scope of our family had been its doom. I, she said, drifted away. And she moved inward. Not that there hadn't been something good, something even magical, about the years between us. But at this juncture it would take heroic efforts to reconcile our marriage, and she for one lacked the energy. It had been sapped from her, apparently, and now all she could do was to sit here alone, in this strange hotel room, weeping in front of the television. To these assertions I cannot begin to respond. They are the truth of the matter between myself and Bea, but not this Bea, not this surrogate in lime capris.

Still, I have little choice. "Get your things," I say. "You're coming home."

We run through the gale, splashing in deep cold water like children. In the car, the woman fumbles with the seatbelt as if she's never been in a Toyota before. As I carefully guide us across town, she applies makeup to her tear-ravaged, puffy face. I stare out at the whisking wipers, the unsure traffic lights, the disappeared roads, trying to ignore the light from her visor mirror. Upstairs, she asks me to sleep out on the couch. I agree to this, and wait patiently to use the bathroom as she goes through a lengthy preparing-for-bed routine. She kisses me on the cheek before crawling off to bed.

I toss and turn. The wind and rain batter at the window next to me. The whole night seems to pass before I drift into restless sleep. When I wake, a portly form is stepping out the door. It is the woman. She carries two suitcases in her hands. A pair of framed photographs have been taken from the wall and reside under her right arm. She looks back at me with something like longing or pity in her eyes. Then she sets the suitcases down on the landing, turns, and pulls the door closed. I lay stretched across the couch, my neck still craning up. I listen to her feet on the stairs. Out the window behind me there is light, but I do not bring myself to look upon it.

# Jed Myers

## Loyal

Stacks of bills on the marble  
dining room table, unopened cards  
and letters (sympathy and still  
some get well) scattered over  
the kitchen counter, lists  
on lined paper of accounts  
where funds are held tucked under  
long term care brochures  
and prescription pill bottles,  
the upstairs closets filled  
with garments of no use to us,  
cards with attorneys' numbers  
on both bedroom dressers,  
the nightstands' and the bathroom  
drawers stuffed with the reminders  
of obsolete necessities, slips  
of colored memo pads still sticking  
everywhere, and all the pictures,  
books, clocks, boxes, curios...  
the furniture of course, rugs  
and tapestries, the curtains  
shading no one from the glare  
of the world, the house itself,  
the ground it sits on still  
requiring care—it comes down  
to hair gel tubes, paperclips, scissors,  
the little bronze French officer  
under which lies the grocery list,  
the almost-empty jar of marmalade  
on the bottom shelf in the fridge,  
and the dozens of frozen foil-wrapped  
restaurant leftovers that would wait  
forever if we let them. Things can be  
loyal, more loyal than we are,  
holding still, even for the dead.

# Jasper Haze

## Delicate Car Bomb

I heard it as she slept, the bird in her chest.  
I kissed along the true ribs, up the sternum,  
ran my cool tongue in figure eights over her  
albumen torso, but nothing  
would diffuse its plangent flutter.

She said it rained more under trees, so we stood  
and listened to the night pour out like a slit pig.  
She taught me how to poker shuffle with my tongue,  
how to gamble with my mouth, it was as if  
an EpiPen of lechery held the dissolution of everything.

There is reason to believe that supernovas give way  
to black holes, that the future is vast and effrontery  
like telling someone who has jumped from a building  
he'll hit ground soon.

# Sheryl L. Nelms

## Frogs

the dark  
and the rain  
brought them out

hopping across Highway 15

until the cars  
hit them

popping them  
like

boiling cranberries

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Laura Aydelotte** will receive her Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Chicago this June. When she is not plunged into the poetry of the 14th-17th centuries, she spends her time writing, swimming, knitting, playing various instruments and taking photographs of, among other things, her pet bird, Edmund Spenser, who is featured on this issue's cover.

**Erik Bendix** loves vitality and texture in words. His poetry distills rhythms of world dance he teaches, silence of woods he lives in, joy of music, and painful gratitude at his family's Holocaust survival. A student of the movement arts from Tai Chi to Rumi's dervish whirling, he listens for cadence in words and how it resonates in the body. He has translated Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the latter into full sonnet form in English. His work has appeared in the *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Monarch Review*, *Word Riot*, *St. Anne's Review*, and *Forge Journal*.

**Brian Castleberry** served as an editor of the fiction collection *Richmond Noir* and currently teaches film studies and creative writing at The College of William and Mary. He lives in Virginia with his wife and their two dogs.

**Stuart Chittenden** is a British expat in the American Midwest. A branding consultant by day, indulging often in existential discussions with clients, he has also founded a conversation consultancy, Squishtalks ([www.squishtalks.com](http://www.squishtalks.com)), that produces conversation experiences. He believes that written, verbal and silent conversation will enable us to work brightly and to live better and well. Engage with him, please, at [about.me/stuartchittenden](mailto:me@stuartchittenden)

**Jasper Haze** is an absurd logophile currently living in the Bay Area. He has recently become infatuated with Magellanic clouds and undiscovered celestial orbs. He enjoys chess because he loves the word checkmate. In a previous life he was an Oriental rug in the Emperor's chamber. In general, he hopes that hoping isn't the problem.

**Kate LaDew** is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a B.A. in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, North Carolina with her cat, Charlie Chaplin.

**Robert McGill** is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee and Glimmertrain Stories finalist whose short fiction has appeared in *the Southwest Review*, *the Bryant Literary Review*, *the South Dakota Review* and many other literary publications.

**Jed Myers** is a Philadelphian who has lived in Seattle since 1982. His poems have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *qarrtsiluni*, *Atlanta Review*, *Quiddity*, *Palooka*, *The Monarch Review*, *the Journal of the American Medical Association*, the Rose Alley Press anthology *Many Trails to the Summit*, and elsewhere.

**Sheryl L. Nelms** is from Marysville, Kansas. She graduated from South Dakota State University and has had over 5,000 articles, stories and poems published, including fourteen individual collections of her poems. She is the fiction/nonfiction editor of *The Pen Woman Magazine*, a National League of American Pen Women publication, a contributing editor for *Time Of Singing*, a magazine of Christian poetry, and a three time Pushcart Prize nominee.

**Jacob Oet** is the author of three poetry chapbooks: *Metamorphosis* (Kattywompus Press), *Peeling the Apple* (NightBallet Press), and *Variations* (Red Ochre Press). Jacob's writing appears in *Cream City Review*, *Sugar House Review*, *So to Speak*, *580 Split*, and *Yalobusha*, among others. His awards include the 2011 Younkin-Rivera Poetry Prize and the 2011 Ohioana Robert Fox Award.

**Anthony Opal** lives near Chicago and edits *The Economy*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. To read more, visit [www.anthonypal.com](http://www.anthonypal.com).

**Dan Pinkerton** lives in Des Moines, Iowa. His work has appeared in *New Orleans Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Boston Review*, *Subtropics*, *Salamander*, *Arts & Letters*, and the 2008 *Best New American Voices* anthology.

**Sara Uribe** was born in Querétaro in 1978 and since 1996 has lived in Tamaulipas. She is the author of *Lo que no imaginas* (2004), *Palabras más palabras menos* (2006), and *Nunca quise detener el tiempo* (2007). English translations of her poems have appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Gargoyle*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Journal*, and *So to Speak*, among others.

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