

# EDITORS' FOREWORD

The Editors are pleased to bring you *Euphony Journal's* Spring 2014 issue. It's been a labor of love for all of us, and we hope that as you read it, you love it just as much (but ideally laborless). The works of poetry this season comment on the human condition through analytic lenses as diverse as quotidian life and abstraction. We start off our pages with a five-piece series that examines a single, noteworthy event across space and time, and we end with a lighthearted work that publishers and graphic designers alike will appreciate. Sandwiched in between are poems about coffins, buses, and interrogations of love and sexuality. Attempting to evoke this issue's prose pieces with a few short words is likely a futile endeavor, but the best choices are verbs: look out for falling, running, reflecting, fighting, dying.

Thank you to all our contributors and readers. There would not be a *Euphony Journal* without you.

THE EDITORS



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EUPHONY  
VOLUME 14, NUMBER 2  
Spring 2014

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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, [www.euphonyjournal.org](http://www.euphonyjournal.org), for more information.

Founded Spring 2000 by  
Stephen Barbara and Matthew Deming

[euphonyjournal.org](http://euphonyjournal.org)

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[www.clmp.org](http://www.clmp.org)

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# Lee Varon

## "Shot in the Head" Series

### *Shot in the Head*

Beside the swing  
the swing where you pushed her  
her yellow dress  
taking it off slowly  
like peeling a plum

when your eyes opened in the hospital  
bullet still lodged  
like a dark secret in your brain  
secret of your nights  
at the farmhouse with Mrs. Harding.

But your eyes didn't open  
on her green eyes  
on a fluttering of hope  
on tomorrow—

your wife was there  
her anger flowing  
like syrup  
into the black of night  
fireflies going off  
to death's porch.

### *I Wanted to Know*

I wanted to be the door  
of your mouth  
as she found your body,  
rubbed it along the geranium  
softness  
of her body,  
I wanted to know what it was like  
in those moments  
when all the brittleness of your  
wife broke into fine kindling



and was set afire in your lover's  
hands,  
I wanted to know you, Edwin;  
after all, I have your lips  
your high cheekbones.  
I wanted to be a part of your joy,  
even your sorrow;  
I've spent a lifetime imagining both.  
When you were shot  
I wanted to take  
the bullet from your brain  
give you another ending.  
Or if you must be shot  
I wanted your redheaded lover  
to rush into your hospital room  
and throw her body on yours—  
a blanket of petals.

Neither happened.  
Your wife brought you home  
your lover called  
the phone rang.  
Paralyzed, you weren't able to answer  
or maybe one time you did answer,  
heard her sobbing,  
tried to speak Ls and Vs,  
tried to take love  
from a shard of glass.

### *Edwin*

Grandfather, with his three-piece suit  
his easy smile—  
I wanted to be  
the child in the photo  
he had his arm draped over,  
the one  
he let drive his new cars,  
and surprised  
with cinnamon candies,  
the one who gave him a sip  
of water after he was shot.

I never laid eyes on Loretta Harding,  
the woman he was

shot holding,  
her red hair  
clotted with blood.

I wanted to be the air  
between them,  
a wedge of stars,

their last kiss.

*All of Something*

For my grandmother.

She wanted to take the Jewish  
out of me  
as if she could pull ribbon  
out of a braid.

She had that sad look  
when she shook her head:  
I just wish you were all of something.

But I was a sign  
of her shame—  
her daughter

who ran off with a Jew  
who gave me my curly hair,  
broad nose.

My grandmother loved me  
in spite of herself  
pretended I was pure,

dreamed my mother  
had married a hometown boy  
like the one she was engaged to

when she packed her trunk  
with plaids and cashmere  
and went off to college.

The one whose diamond  
she gave back,  
the one she left

and broke her mother's heart.  
Sometimes I wanted to erase myself  
take back that diamond

tell my mother she'd made a mistake  
tell her I forgave her for having me  
Pick up that other life, I'd tell her

Start over.

*You Learned the News*

You were at your father's funeral  
in Marietta.  
You came home  
the train stopped,  
hiss of steam  
smell of the rubber mill  
drifting on a hot summer night.

You in your mourning clothes  
black stockings  
straight seams.  
Who told you the news?  
Your husband shot  
with that woman  
the redhead with bold green eyes  
wife of prominent businessman.

Magnolias were opening  
cream-colored  
edge of pink lace  
among fireflies—  
and you almost a widow.

You brought your husband home  
paralyzed on his left side,  
taught him to use a spoon  
hold a pen  
almost write his name.

I wasn't born yet,  
I wasn't your granddaughter yet,  
but I was waiting  
to tell your story.

# Alfredo Franco

## Blue Divisions

"Es por el azul sin historia..." —Federico Garcia Lorca

### I

Sebastián Alejandro Moro, known as Vargas, was a tall man of forty-seven with a thin black mustache. The left side of his face was slightly puffer than the right, the result of primitive dentistry at the POW camp outside of Moscow, where he'd spent ten years. The anesthetic had consisted of a sucker punch by a huge-fisted orderly.

Sebastián bought a sandwich at the Famous Deli in the Langley Park Shopping Center, then crossed New Hampshire Avenue in the cold February night. He was wearing dark blue overalls under a Navy peacoat, and scuffed steel-capped boots. He walked to his apartment in a complex of old brick buildings on Merrimac Drive, behind the Lansburgh's department store, where he worked as a mechanic on the delivery trucks. In his kitchen, Sebastián ate his sandwich and worked for an hour on an outdated Sherwin Cody home-study English course.

Later, in sleep, he dreamed of Waldemar standing on the wing root of a Messerschmitt Bf 109. The fighter plane had a blithe top hat painted on its fuselage. It was always the same dream—Waldemar waving goodbye before climbing into his cockpit. Waldemar had been shot down over Vilajuiga, captured, and given over to a tribunal of peasant women, who cut him to pieces with their cooking knives.

Sebastián rushed to him, begging him not to go, embracing him, rubbing his face against the rough flight suit, inhaling its wonderful smell of motor oil and gunpowder. Meanwhile, his mother played *La belle Hélène* on the old massive Bösendorfer in the parlor, for they were on the airfield in Spain and at the same time in Sebastián's childhood room in Cuba, a fabulous room with walls of green mosaic tiles, turquoise doorknobs, a Moorish window of multicolored glass. But his father, a balding, pudgy man bloated with opinions, might open the door at any moment and catch them in each other's arms, and Waldemar would be castrated all over again...

Sebastián staggered out of bed. He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. He made coffee, Cuban-style, pouring boiling water through a socklike filter. He drank the strong coffee and smoked Chesterfields, remembering Spain, where he arrived at the age of twenty, packed off by his father, who told him it was his obligation to defend Catholicism from the Reds.

Sebastián's obsessive Cuban sense of hygiene made it difficult to live among the soldiers, who reeked of chorizo and went unwashed for

weeks. At night he could barely breathe in the hot goatlike stench of the barracks. Spaniards seemed to have no need for water, neither for bathing nor drinking. During breaks, leather wineskins were passed from man to man. The wine only intensified Sebastián's constant thirst. The brusqueness of the Spanish character and way of speech—the cutting lisp of the Z compared to the soft S of the Cuban accent—repelled him. His pronunciation was always being mocked. He was called, contemptuously, “*El Negro*,” although his blood was as Spanish as theirs.

With scant training, he was marched against Republican machine guns at Badajoz. He lay in the dirt as soldiers leaped over him shouting “*Viva la muerte*,” meeting instant, stupid deaths. A brutal hand lifted him by his collar and thrust him forward toward muzzles that spat fire out of breaks in the stone walls. He ran blindly, dropping his rifle, screaming hysterically for his mother, “*Mamá, Mamá*,” until something burst in his right leg, and he fell behind a tree stump. Italian tanks knocked out the machine guns, and then the Moorish Regulares swept in, gutting wounded Reds with the curved blades of their *janbijas*. Permission was granted to rape any women inside the town.

Not shot for cowardice, miraculously, he was allowed to recover in a field hospital and then transferred to a German Condor Legion air base in Ávila, where Waldemar was stationed with the 2nd Squadron of Jagdgruppe 88. Sebastián became a paddlefoot, trained to work on aircraft engines and to load the bomb bays of converted Ju 52s.

To the Germans, Sebastián counted as a Spaniard—inherently inferior, another creature to be bullied—until *Oberleutnant* Waldemar Mulhaupt, an ace with twenty-one kills, became his protector. Waldemar lacked that deadly, tight-lipped, prissy perfectionism that characterized so many of the German officers. He flew with grinning insouciance into waves of Chatos and Moscas. He adopted Sebastián, fascinated by his Cuban origins because of the descriptions he had read of the island in Alexander von Humboldt. He helped Sebastián develop his body through the methods of Joseph Pilates and *Lebensreform* diets. He taught him boxing and German literature—Winckelmann, Stefan George, and Nietzsche—and instilled scorn for civilian life. “Safety,” Waldemar would say, “is the death of the soul. Live always at the most forward outposts of human adventure!”

Together, one night they watched a screening of *Olympia* at the air base. Sebastián was mesmerized by the opening sequence, the camera moving sensuously through the neglected ruins of the Parthenon, caressing the stones, reviving the gods—Dionysus, Aphrodite, Athena—from centuries of European decay. A new day was dawning. The marble *Diskobolos* became human flesh, releasing his discus in a spiral of liberated energy... Afterward, they rested, smoking in bed, Sebastián in the crook of Waldemar's muscular arm.

Now, twenty-four years later, it was a cold dawn in Langley Park, Maryland, and time to shower and shave. Sebastián put on his overalls and left gratefully for work.

## II

One June morning, Sebastián was servicing a truck in the large parking lot at the rear entrance of Lansburgh's, near the loading bays. The lot was almost empty in the bright sun. He'd stepped out from under the hood of the truck to mop his sweaty face. He saw a woman, in her middle thirties, walking toward her car, one of the few on the lot, a brand-new black 1961 four-door Plymouth Valiant with canted tail fins and the image of a spare tire embossed on its trunk. She was dressed in a white short-sleeved blouse and a pink cotton pencil skirt. Her hair was reddish, shoulder length, full and thick. She shielded her eyes from the light with a saluting hand. She had a large, big-toothed smile. Like everybody he'd seen in America, she had excellent teeth. With his tongue he felt the jagged remains of molars on his left side. He sensed that his own breath was permanently foul, no matter how much Lavoris he used.

Out of nowhere, a young man was there—muscular, about nineteen, in jeans and a white T-shirt. He grabbed the redhead from behind, stifling her mouth with his hand. He was trying to shove her into her car. Slamming down the hood of the truck, Sebastian shouted: “Hey—what you doing there?”

Surprised, the young man lost hold of the woman, who began to scream. Sebastián ran over. The assailant backed away, facing him, and pulled a Mercator knife from his back pocket.

*Ay, hijo*, Sebastián thought, stuffing his bandana calmly into the large breast pocket of his overalls. I have faced more frightening men than you. And wielding, of all things, a Mercator knife! With the little cat on it! It was the handiest lock-back knife ever made. Not standard issue, almost every man in the Blue Division had bought one during his layover in Berlin, on the way to the Eastern Front. Sebastian managed to keep his through years of combat and even for several months into his time at the POW camp—the Soviets had too many prisoners to search each one thoroughly. Until he killed Bermudez, who tried to steal his bread ration. As Bermudez lay bleeding to death between two buckets of mortar, a Soviet guard confiscated the knife, wiped the blood off the blade with a dirty handkerchief, and pocketed it for himself. A couple of Bermudez's straggly Spanish friends demanded justice. So the guard pushed Sebastián into a shed, where he expected to be shot or beaten to death. But the guard signaled to him to keep quiet while he hit the wooden wall with his hard rubber club and shouted Russian obscenities. Then he ordered him back to work. *Rabota!*

Sebastián struck fast and hard, hitting the young man square in the sternum. The young man farted and dropped the knife on the hot macadam. Always hit first, knock the wind out of them, Waldemar had taught. Sebastián had seen Waldemar beat up some of the crueller men of the Condor Legion, such as the gaunt alcoholic in charge of tank training, Dirlwanger.

The young thug was doubled over, trying to breathe. Sebastián buried his fingers into his hair, which was greasy with brilliantine, and lifted the head back, yanking it down, full-face, onto his raised knee. Then he rubbed the brilliantine off on his overalls.

### III

The woman was Mrs. Darlene Morrow of Hyattsville, Maryland. She persuaded the manager of Lansburgh's, Mr. Coleman, to promote Sebastián from mechanic to house detective for his heroic act. The local Langley Park newspaper did a story on the courageous Cuban refugee, Felipe Vargas. He was photographed shaking hands with the mayor of Langley Park. What message did he have for the Communists who had enslaved his land? Sebastián hated the attention and worried, above all, that his history would be exposed.

His new position seemed easy enough, though Sebastián preferred tinkering with the trucks. He was astonished by the vast material luxury in the store. For most of his adult life, he had known only deprivation. All that he had to do now was walk through air-conditioned showrooms in a suit and tie, pretending to be a customer, keeping a sharp eye out for shoplifters, subduing them if necessary. He encountered Mrs. Morrow almost every day on his rounds. He would spot her in Notions or Piece Goods, Draperies or Radios, or in Women's-Misses Dresses, where she often sat down in one of the Bertioia chairs to smoke a menthol cigarette. She would smile and nod discreetly, knowing that she mustn't "break his cover."

Sometimes he did his job so well that even she was unaware of him. He had learned as a soldier to move noiselessly. She would be mesmerized by a silver coffeepot or a crystal cocktail shaker in one of the Columbus display cases spotlighted by a superstructure of brass light cones above. Sebastián noticed how material beauty, the textures of objects, excited her. She herself seemed made of a polished high-grade plastic. Her voice, with its diamond-clear articulation, sounded like those recordings from the telephone company.

Gradually, Mrs. Morrow became playful, pretending, when she knew he was watching, to pocket something small, smiling at him naughtily. He would purse his lips and wag his finger at her in mock admonishment. With an exaggerated pout, she would place the item back on the shelf. The pantomime continued for weeks until, one day, she went up to him, redolent of Chanel and Kools, and asked him to buy her a cup of coffee in the Hampshire Room.

Up close, he saw that she was older than he'd thought, slightly over forty, with parentheses around the ends of her lips when she smiled, and small, soft scars on the right side of her chin—little mounds of tissue that reminded him of Waldemar's battle scars, which he had loved to caress. There were wrinkles beneath her hazel eyes. He leaned away from her slightly, conscious of his own imperfections: his scarred, pitted complexion;

the dead nerves in his left cheek; his possibly hot, unpleasant breath. Before he could explain that personal contact with customers was forbidden—so many English words to assemble!—she pulled him by the arm toward the store's elegant tearoom.

Mr. Coleman caught them sitting there. He bowed to Mrs. Morrow, then glared at Sebastián, who stammered excuses, while under the table Mrs. Morrow's foot rubbed feline up and down his right leg. Mrs. Morrow placed her cigarette in the notch of the ashtray and looked up at the manager.

"I felt ill and about to faint. Mr. Vargas caught me in the nick of time. Once again, he has saved my life."

#### IV

At the end of the war in Spain, Sebastián did not return to Cuba but moved to Berlin, where Waldemar's sister Herta lived. He sat in cafés on Unter den Linden, looking down an avenue of red banners with swastikas, imagining that Waldemar would emerge from the crowds of passersby who, bolstered by the early victories of the Reich, walked with a look of confidence and even euphoria. He attended concerts by Wilhelm Furtwängler, entranced by how the conductor's body was possessed by the music, his shakes and convulsions like a *ñanigo* during a *toque de santo*. On a snowy December day, he saw Hitler give a speech on the steps of the Altes Museum, in the Lustgarten. Although Sebastián's German had improved, he could barely understand this little man's strange pronunciation, his guttural growls and shouts, his unusual vocabulary. It didn't sound, to Sebastián, like German at all.

Herta Mulhaupt resided in an apartment on the Kuno-Fischer-Strasse. She was tall and athletic like her older brother and wore her hair short, in the style of a *neue Frau*. She listened to Sebastián's passionate account, in bad German, of her brother's exploits. When he told her of having attended Hitler's speech, she came very close and whispered: "Our Führer has only one testicle."

She thought Sebastián an amusing oddity from the tropics, an extra from the movie *La Habanera*. She slept with him and taught him how different, yet pleasurable, it could be with a woman, though at first he was overwhelmed by the oceanic odor and the oysterlike consistency of her sex. But when Sebastián heard of the formation of the Blue Division, he rushed to the Spanish embassy near the Tiergarten to volunteer. He wanted to become a soldier worthy of Waldemar and departed for Grafenwöhr for training. The clashes between Spanish and German concepts of discipline were frequent, and one Spaniard even murdered a German lieutenant who'd forbidden him to walk with his hands in his pockets. By August of 1941, Sebastián was en route to the Russian front, where he fought at Krasny Bor. Once, in the whirling snows, he saw Jochen Peiper; the physical beauty of the young general, who reminded him of Waldemar, caught at his throat.



As the war progressed, Sebastián thought he would die from sheer cold and hunger, running out of fuel tablets for his Esbit pocket stove. Fleas ravaged his scalp and pubic area. He dreaded the daily hand-to-hand combat with the Soviets—large, fierce, determined men—who gave the enemy no quarter. It took an enormous toll, and Sebastián noted how, each day, the distance between him and the sentries to his left and right became greater until he felt terrifyingly alone in the vast white wasteland.

When the Blue Division was withdrawn, Sebastián and several of his Spanish comrades chose to remain. They were absorbed after further training into the Waffen-SS, fighting in Latvia and Yugoslavia. Once, as part of a reconnaissance team, Sebastián came upon the body of a raped and murdered woman in the fields, her stockings bunched down at her ankles, her knees still up and spread apart, her mouth crusted with dried blood, her sex quick with flies. Sebastián vomited and the *Obersturmführer* whipped him viciously across the face with his riding crop.

He returned to Berlin in 1945 with the 101st Company under Miguel Ezquerro. He could barely recognize the city in its bombed-out, ruined state. He managed to make his way to Herta's apartment, finding an old woman amid dust and broken glass. The woman worked a foot pump attached to a tube that sent filtered air into a small coffin-shaped tent. There was a child stirring inside the tent. She told him that Herta had had the child with a French *Gastarbeiter*. The Frenchman made a mysterious trip to his home in Lyon, where he was assassinated by the Resistance. Herta, without a transit visa or even a passport, took off after him, recklessly, leaving her child in the care of this old woman. Without official identification, she was executed summarily, as a spy, at the French border by the Gestapo.

Sebastián fought in the streets against the incoming Soviet troops. He and two Spaniards, Alfredo Molina and Jaime Bermudez, wrought havoc on T-34 tanks and harassed the enemy from windows and doorways at Alexanderplatz, Mitte, and Hermannplatz. Exhausted, they tried to take refuge in a luxury hotel on Unter den Linden that continued operating in the midst of battle, with uniformed waiters serving dinner on the terrace to the sounds of flak cannons and screams. The elderly manager of the hotel greeted them politely and, just as politely, asked them to leave. They were dirty and foreign and their weapons made the other patrons nervous. Should the Soviets win, the hotel did not want to be found harboring SS men. "There are beds available in the *U-Bahn* across the street."

"After all that we have sacrificed for your Deutschland," Bermudez spat, and hit the old man brutally with the butt of his rifle.

"Let's fuck his daughter, *chicos*," he said, moving toward the terrified young woman crouched over her father.

Sebastián aimed his captured Soviet *Papasha* at Bermudez and ordered him to stop. He knew even then that someday he would have to kill this man.

The three men joined hundreds of French, Belgian, and Spanish volunteers inside the Reichstag. They dropped grenades from balustrades, machine-gunned relentless waves of Soviets, who kept flowing in, overwhelming them, driving them back and down into the cellars. Molina, covering their retreat, was killed. Trapped in the crowded, suffocating basement, white with plaster dust, exhaustion, and terror, Sebastián, Bermudez, and the last defenders of Nazi Germany surrendered.

## V

It began with exhilarating drives on Saturdays in her Valiant to Wheaton Plaza or Silver Spring, where they lunched at Woodward & Lothrop or the Hecht Company. Often they went into Washington, D.C., to eat fried chicken at the S&W Cafeteria and hear Dixieland at The Bayou. Once, they picnicked at Great Falls, Virginia. She drove fast and carefree. Evenings after work they sat in the dark nooks of the Black Steer cocktail lounge or danced to slow music at the Royal Arms restaurant. Sebastián was clumsy at first, knowing only the dance of death, but she was a patient guide and her body wonderful to hold close. At Jimmy Comber's and at Arthur Hallam's Pub, she introduced Sebastián to bourbon. She became his teacher of American life.

Once, she drove him past her house on Chapman Road. It was a single-level brick house, identical to the other houses in the neighborhood except for its blue awnings. Although he'd thought her wealthy and had expected a more imposing home, the sight of it filled Sebastián with well-being and simple joy. He wished he could live in such a house, with her, for the rest of his life, in peace finally, liberated from history. But he remembered that her husband lived there with her, and her son.

"What does your husband do? How old is your son? Do you have pictures?"

She always changed the subject. Like him, she had secrets. *An exile in her own country*, he thought.

She decided that his apartment was too Spartan. She bought him a Magnavox Micromatic portable record player, a Silvertone radio, and several long-playing albums of her favorite American singing groups—the Modernaires, the Randy Van Horne Singers, RCA's Living Voices, the Mel-Tones, the Hi-Lo's, music of relentless American optimism, often mere sounds—ooh-poopy-do, skeedyah-boo, pow! But intimate and romantic too:

Two lips must insist  
On two more to be kissed  
Or they'll never know what love can do...

Mrs. Morrow bought him a two-wheeled cocktail cart, an elegant glass shaker with delicate white cross-hatching and bold black lines, a shiny nickel syphon with a carton of seltzer chargers, and a box from

the Tick-Tock Liquor Store, from which she took out bottles one by one, holding them up to him like sacred vessels, explaining their properties, then placing them on the altar of the cart.

“This,” she said, assuming a low, sultry voice and letting a red bang fall over the right half of her face, “is *Ancient Age*. If you can find a better bourbon, buy it... And here we have *Pikesville Supreme Rye*—don’t you dare make me a Manhattan with any other rye, Mister Vargas!”

The first time they made love, Sebastián trembled like a leaf. He had not slept with a woman except Herta, all those years ago. He postponed, delayed—“Let’s play that record again, *mi amor*”—but finally she removed her wedding band and opened her blouse. She took his hands and placed them on her breasts, which were small, tipped with tiny rosebuds. Her body was thin and lithe as a dancer’s; her arms, bony, with girlish, knobby elbows. She knelt and helped him with her mouth. His fingers found her little facial scars, and their softness made him come too quickly. She forgave him and they moved to the bed. She loved to be licked—the merest touch of the tip of his tongue on her hard little nub brought forth high-pitched joy and ineffable creaminess. Unlike Herta, her pelagic odors were masked with Lysol, but still perceptible and thrilling. Her hazel eyes seemed composed of infinite gradations of brown, green, and gold—in ecstasy they looked through, beyond him into the far, far distance.

She said little about her past, except that she had been born in Hyattsville and had never ventured too far beyond it. Everything a person could want was right here. Nor did she ever ask about his past. Sebastián told her of playing chess as a child at a simultaneous exhibition against Capablanca at El Encanto department store in Havana. He’d had the makings of a chess prodigy, but Capa beat him by the fourth move. Or about how his mother had gone to Mass every Sunday with the great poet Dulce Maria Loynaz. But these names meant nothing to Mrs. Morrow and did not arouse her curiosity. She would listen politely, then ask an unrelated question. It annoyed him at first, but wasn’t what he wanted exactly that: to be freed from the past? Her ignorance was his freedom.

One night, after making love, her index finger found the nub of burnt flesh near his left armpit.

“What happened here, darling?”

He had had Molina, during the last days of Berlin, burn off his Waffen-SS blood-group tattoo with a lit cigarette, muffling his screams with a bunched-up handkerchief. Then he did the same for Molina.

“*Nada*. An accident.” He diverted her by caressing those little scars on her chin. “My favorite part,” he whispered.

She blushed. “You love my dimples, don’t you, crazy man. Say ‘dimples’...”

“*Deempels...*”

“No, ‘dim-ples’... Shall we consult Sherwin Cody?”

“*Que bonita eres*,” he said, kissing her softly, “*mi amor*.”

She shuddered with pleasure.

“I love it when you speak Spanish to me. It sounds so dirty.”

She openly fantasized of rape and submission. Sebastián could not understand, having seen so many bodies defiled. One afternoon he returned from work and found her lying on his sofa, wearing nothing but a crumpled white blouse. She looked up at him with a mock guilty look.

“You know that guy you beat up in the parking lot? Well...he got me, darling... I tried to fight him off, but he beat me down and filled all three of my holes... It'll take me weeks to push out all his cum...”

Sebastián knew she was playing.

“*A ver, cochina,*” he said, and turned her over, peering into her ass and vagina, pretending, to her obvious delight, to be angry.

“And now I check the mouth,” he commanded.

She turned and opened her mouth wide. As he bent down to probe, a terrible odor reached him. It wasn't halitosis—it seemed to come from somewhere deep inside of her, from her very entrails. It was more than sour; it smelled of blood and fungus and putrefaction. There wasn't a horrible smell he hadn't experienced in war, but it surprised him and he winced away from her, and then, immediately, to cover up, kissed her passionately. Perhaps he had only smelled his own breath.

He only ever slapped her once. She had found a German book on his night table, one of Waldemar's favorites, *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*. She asked what language it was in. It didn't look like Spanish.

“German? How did you learn that in Cuba?”

“We have teachers, just like here.”

“German sounds so ugly. Hitlerish.”

She reddened from his slap and smiled.

“I wish you'd do that more often, darling. Because sometimes, I have to tell you, you're a little too loving.”

## VI

In 1956, the Red Cross hospital ship *Semiramis* returned Sebastián to Spain. The Cuban embassy in Madrid helped repatriate the gaunt, emaciated man to Havana. His parents had died, the old grand house in Vedado lost or sold. He was taken in those first months by an elderly black woman who had been his mother's maid. She gave him a cot and fed him creamed cornmeal to get his strength back. It took time before he was able to rid his nostrils of the stench of the camp. He found a job fixing trucks for El Encanto department store. Everyone thought he was a Spaniard because of his lisp. He was called “*El Gallego*.”

The gaiety of the city was offensive to him, after all the suffering he had seen. He kept to himself, spending his free hours in movie houses where, for the first time, he saw newsreels about the extermination camps, the crematoriums, the piles of skeletal bodies, the outrages that he, he himself, had helped inflict, all the worse for his having done it unknowingly, out of love for a dead man. He sat in the womblike dark, stunned with shame.

When Castro came to power, Sebastián knew he was in grave danger, having fought against the Soviet Union. Castro's speeches reminded him of Hitler's. History will absolve me. *La historia me absolverá. Die Geschichte wird mich freisprechen!* Sebastián purchased a fake passport and a round-trip ticket to the United States—a one-way ticket would have revealed his intention to leave permanently, and he would never have been allowed onto the plane. His black-market contact kept raising the price, exhausting all of Sebastián's savings. Finally, a day before his scheduled departure, the effeminate little fat man in a white linen suit showed up at his apartment, bringing the envelope with the BOAC tickets and the passport. As he was about to hand it over to Sebastián, he pulled the envelope back, held it above his head, and asked for another five hundred dollars. Sebastián remained very still and quiet. The sweating little *maricón* was probably doing this to all his customers—simple, decent people; pregnant mothers; office workers—desperate to leave the island. He asked him to wait a moment. The money was in his desk drawer, he said. Sebastián went to the drawer, grasped the Walther semiautomatic and spun, firing once, opening a neat red hole in the center of the man's forehead. He took the envelope and ripped it open. Everything was there. His new name was Felipe Vargas, mechanic. He stuffed the corpse into the closet, where it would decompose until the landlord or some militiamen broke down the door. By then, Sebastián would be free.

At the airport, mannish women in green fatigues taunted the *gusanos*. He carried nothing with him but a small suitcase with one change of clothes and a Dopp kit. He was allowed to board after eight hours of questions, waiting, and more questions. He was settling back into his seat when militiamen boarded. He stiffened, but they walked past him and took another passenger off at gunpoint. Finally, the plane was cleared for departure. As soon as they were aloft, the cabin filled with resounding Hebrew prayers. The woman in the seat next to him explained that the flight had been chartered by a Jewish organization in Miami to evacuate Cuban Jews. The remaining seats had been made available to anyone wanting to leave the country. Sebastián covered his face in his hands and wept.

## VII

Mrs. Morrow's thinness became extreme after a year. Sebastián could see her ribs clearly through her pale skin. Her nose became more prominent; her cheeks hollow; her lips slacker, as if the teeth had recessed. He found red bumps on her scalp when he stroked and kissed her ever-thinning hair. She began to walk with a slight limp. She tried to cover up odd medicinal odors with excessive Chanel and Zonite. He would turn to find her fast asleep in a chair, her mouth hanging wide open.

"It's nothing, darling, really; I'm just a little tired... Oh, it's time for *Candlelight and Wine* on WQMR! Would you turn on the Silvertone, please?"

For a whole week she did not show up at Lansburgh's or at his apartment. When he saw her again, he almost crushed her fragile body with his desperate, grateful embrace.

When she took off her blouse, her left shoulder and breast looked scorched by extreme sunburn. She refused to explain. She tired quickly when they tried to make love. Sometimes she preferred just to lie in the crook of his muscular arm, in the dark, listening to jazz on the radio.

One night, his tongue and lower lip numb from the effort, he managed to make her come for the first time in months. Her brief whimper of pleasure was followed by a sound of sucked air, and the room was filled with a sudden smell of feces. It was a familiar odor in the trenches, where men could not clean themselves or voided out of fear.

"Oh God, no!" she cried, curling into fetal position, hiding her head under a pillow. She shook with sobs.

Sebastian turned her body over gently. He began to wipe her sunken buttocks with the end of the bedsheet. She threw the pillow off violently.

"Don't touch me! Get out of the room! Leave me alone!"

"*Mi amor*, please, this is nothing. I love you—"

"Get out! Out!"

He heard her soaking the sheet in the bathtub and crying. She came out haggard and disheveled, her blouse buttoned unevenly.

"We'll go to Germany," Sebastián said, trying to keep his voice steady, "and put you on special diets. They are called *Lebensreform*. We'll live on the Kuno-Fischer-Strasse in Berlin, in an apartment that has a big balcony full of flowers. We'll be happy together." He hugged her, as if to absorb her illness onto his own body.

She pushed him away.

"I don't want you to see me like this. I need to get better. Please, now just let me get to my car..."

The weeks passed and he did not hear from her. At work, he would spot shoplifters and let them steal. He made mistakes in English as if he had lost the language, lost America itself. Sebastián, who knew real death and had survived so much, felt he would die if he did not see her soon, just as surely as if he were shot or bayoneted. Finally, he walked up Riggs Road and through labyrinths of identical streets with identical houses until he saw the house on Chapman Road, the one with the blue awnings. It was night by the time he reached it. Her Valiant wasn't in the driveway. The curtains were drawn and there was no light behind them. He stood on the stoop, looking up at the house. He knocked. He shouted her name. Rain began to drum on the blue awnings. He felt very old and frightened, no longer the warrior Waldemar had shaped. He turned at last and began the long walk back to his apartment. The neon sign of Lansburgh's floated, blurry and disembodied, in the night rain.

# John Gorman

## God Bless the Treadmills

Bertha got tired of cold cuts and Cheerios and having to shop fresh each day. She kept bugging me to hire a Miller to run on our treadmill and get the electricity going again, but Millers didn't come cheap and I hardly had enough beans to put food on the table let alone pay for a marathon man. So Bertha sulked in the corner flipping the powerless remote as if I didn't already know the idiot box was off. She had no clue I was nanoseconds from splitting on her and the twins. The Blackout saved my marriage. Without it, I'd probably be shacking up in my very own wikiup halfway across country.

Frankly, I'd had it with the daily grind. I wasn't put on this mudball to crunch numbers and fast-track my way to carpal tunnel central. About the only thing that brought me a sense of worth was my extracurricular doings with the Miraculous Meddlers. It gave a mortal mook like me a chance to bring some harmony into this crummy world. We threw parties for unwed mothers, big-brothered delinquents, and launched message-in-a-bottle campaigns to put prayer back into the schools.

Then Jimbo came along and we started firebombing abortion clinics and alternative medicine centers. He brought on the Blackout so I suppose that didn't make him such a prick, considering he helped save my marriage. Also, he took me under his wing when I needed it most. On the flipside, he scooped a big gob of integrity out of our local Right of Life chapter and gave me an ulcer.

Before his siege, us Miraculous Meddlers were patrons of Ketchum Street Whorehouse. Not me in particular. I'm more of a lapdance-fiend. Jimbo made us crawl out from behind our holy banner. He got down and dirty and by gosh cleaned up our act. With him, picnics, potato sack races, and town square rosary-a-thons filled the agenda.

When Jimbo called me into his office after he'd learned I didn't carry out his direct order, I was certain he'd skin my hide. I was supposed to whiz a grenade through the window of the Main Street Abortion Clinic. I can hardly twist the pull-cap off a beer can and he expected me to yank the safety pin off his rust-clad Mills bomb grenade. It was a World War I relic for crying out loud, originally patented by the golf club designer William Mills in 1915. Jimbo didn't want his collectible to go waste, not for salvation.

His instructions were clear and inked to my palm. At 1100 hours, I was to swift over to Main. Slip the grenade from my pocket and then, holding the grenade in my pitching hand, thumb over the safety lever, snatch the safety pin with a pull force of between 45–155 newtons. The hurled grenade, safety lever released, would then rotate the striker into

the percussion cap igniting the fuse. The fuse burns at a controlled rate, providing a time delay, five seconds tops. When the flame reaches the detonator it sparks the filler and when the fuse burns into it, WHAMO.

Those are the mechanics, but what nobody told me was that due to the design of grenades left-handed people hold them upside down. The average soldier can toss one 30 or so meters. Well, I'm no soldier. "Ah, but you're a Christian soldier," Jimbo trumpeted. Had I tossed it who knows where it might have landed? The twins always complained that when I threw them batting practice I chucked too many junkballs. I might've ended up tossing the freaking thing into the bakery. Then where the hell would I get crumbcake?

Jimbo eyeballed me like I'd gone soft. No way. The stains had finally faded from my heart. Back in elementary school, Sister Mary Mulligan told us stains smudge your heart with every sin. So whenever I cussed or picked quarters from the collection basket I felt my heart spoil. What would Sister Mary Mulligan say if she knew I'd carried out cockeyed missions in honor of the Lord?

Jimbo was squeezing his rubberized rosary waiting for me to give an explanation and all I could think of was the time I caught him using his prayer toy to scoop the withered plankton from the bottom of his fish tank.

"What's the deal Bob?" Jimbo said.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Funny thing that Main Street's Clinic is still standing," he said.

"Imagine that."

"You were supposed to nix it."

"I ah, was?"

"Yup."

"Gee, sorry."

By that point, the rosary snaked around his fist. He punched it into his open palm as if breaking in a set of brass knuckles.

"Sorry. Sorry! That's all you have to say for your sorry ass self?" he said.

"Well, it's like this," I said. "I've been thinking a lot lately and it seems wrong to me, what we've been doing, killing a whole lot of innocent folks when we should be preaching peace."

"Are you shitting me? Who told you to think?"

Jimbo dug his pinky into his ear. His sweaty, liverspotted scalp made me think of an old, half-peeled potato. He stopped for a moment and stared at the gunk on his finger. The floorboard joists groaned under my shaky feet, perhaps the groan was the purgatory mob itching to take my spot. I felt sweat build around the elastic band of my jockeys and I made the intrepid squirm of a child trying not to fall in his brand new ice skates.

My left leg was bailing for the open door, but then my mouth caught up.

"I'm not cut out for this," I said.



Jimbo cringed like I'd just suckerpunched him.

I wanted to be gone like an undefined point, hide under the slope of the y-axis or else the dustballs and lint beneath the sheepskin rug. But, then I let Jimbo's fritter-free eyes muscle me into his mealy guest seat, his small chapped lips were too sacred to part and I waited to swallow the bitter pill, strip me of my Eucharistic duties, hand me over to the Church of Sorry Ass Sinners, which, quite frankly, I was all too happy to attend as a spendthrift sinner.

Jimbo cleared his Bible-thumping throat and I saw the folds in his fleshy neck bunch. He fussed with the knobs on his seat first raising then dropping himself a few inches, the ensuing ccchhhrrr, ccchhhrrr, sotto voce, had an odd, almost calming effect on him and he let the blade of his pimply tongue stick out of his mouth.

The room went pitch black and I heard him messing with his chair. Then the scuff of plastic wheels rolling on the bald wood. His footsteps receded and the crank of the blinds startled me. The first thing I noticed was the pastrami pink fetus in the mayonnaise jar. I jammed my knee into his desk, but instead of bolting the hell out of there I agreed to listen to a lost recording of Billy Graham pontificating about how he warded off the devil of Rock n Roll by simply taking hot baths with Epsom salt and singing, till he was royal blue in the face, "Go tell it on the mountain."

While I was listening to this hideous, scratchy recording, I kept wondering if Big Billy had an "innie" or an "outie" belly button.

Jimbo dismissed me when he figured I'd had enough medicine.

It was dusk by then.

Instead of going home right away, I kept walking. What was the point of hurrying back only to be bullied by Bertha and the kids? The streets were lonely. Not a lit lamp for miles. The sky was flecked with millions of stars, ones I'd never seen. Telescopes clot the sidewalks, but it was a good sign, much of the looting had ceased. Come to think of it, many of the kids with their eyes glued to their lenses looked like many of the punks Father Francis and I tried luring away from Best Buy.

I cut through the schoolyard, passed the basketball court, a pair of sneakers hung by its shoelaces off the basketball rim. Over by the handball court, somebody slumped against the wall. I pressed my face to the fence till my nose poked through the metal webbing. The bum was transfixed on something in the sky, hands cupping his kneecap. All I had were a few coins, a half stick of gum, and an old, corduroy jacket button. I slipped the gum under my tongue and walked over to the bum.

"It's not much," I said, "but you can buy a cup of coffee or a pack of Ring Dings."

"I don't need a handout," he quibbled.

"Of course not."

"I'm not homeless you imbecile."

"Oh."

"No."

“Oh.”

That’s why I hated making donations. Just before the First Blackout, I offered a bum a half-eaten burrito and he threw it at me. I let the change clink back into my pocket and then I was on my merry way when a splash of light curled above us, the highrise across the schoolyard lit like the inside of Shea Stadium. A thunderous round of applause followed the pop of Champagne cork.

The flood of light temporarily blinded me. My forehead roasted like a hotplate.

“Before you know it, we’ll hardly see a single star in the sky. When all the lights go up. Not to mention all the pollution.”

“Guess you need to enjoy it while you can.”

“It’s hopeless,” the guy said.

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Two days later, I lost my job and ended up walking the streets, again, but had had a bit more difficulty collecting myself. I couldn’t go home. Bertha would wring my neck and the twins, who already at nine, thought of me as a buffoon, would cast nastier aspersions. The sidewalks were mottled with the same dark spots covering my heart. I might as well have followed them to Gilgamesh.

When I least expected it, my head full of pudding, I stumbled upon the guy I mistook for a bum. He was reading a shale-colored journal thick enough to be the Dead Sea Scrolls. His expression blurred the line between psychotic and dipstick. He fed himself trail mix from a plastic sandwich baggy. Nuts and dried fruit shavings slid down his chin. He chewed with the pomp and pleasure of a newborn. I hallelujahed his sense of nourishment.

“You again,” he said.

I wanted to peel away, but I had this unreasonable urge to get off on a better foot. Eight years of Miraculous Meddling had taken a gruesome toll. For some reason, I tightened my gut as if asking this poor sucker to belt me one. He kept chomping on his nuts with the mandible dexterity of a Hamadryas baboon. Come to think of it, his puffy wisps of hair also reminded me of the old world monkey.

He shook his goodies, offering me a swipe from his bag. I pretended I had a gob of chewing gum.

“You know if it wasn’t for this Blackout I would’ve headed west,” he said.

“Is that so,” I said.

“What else would I do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Boy, you look down in the dumps.”

“Maybe I am.”

“You know what I do when I’m getting that way?” he said, shifting his weight onto the balls of his feet.

“What?”

“I tell myself I’m one step closer to the end.”

He appeared less like baboon and more like Rasputin. A scratch of a mustache squiggled above his lip.

“Necessity, mother of all our troubles.”

“Don’t you mean invention?” I said.

“What I wouldn’t have given for this, ten years ago, leave my permanent stain on society. Here, it bites me in the ass.”

Right then I realized my bum was none other than Murphy Montana, the brains behind the Millers, the surge of human energy, the rebirth of keeping up with the Joneses. His muscular leg propped up on the bench like a shrimp boat captain or a cleanup hitter. He rolled the trail-mix dice-like in his fist and the sparkle in his eyes was the perfect counterpoint to the twinkling Milky Way. My cat tongue tied its own precious knot. I had to clear my throat a few times. The wunderkind maintained flawless balance and an equally flawless grin. If I wasn’t straight, I would have kissed him smack on the lips.

“You should be proud,” I told him. “Doesn’t the Secretary of State want to pin a medal on you?”

“The Secretary of Energy. He sees this thing going national.”

“That’s unbelievable.”

“Yeah, but there’s a boatload of kickbacks to kickback.”

“Oh.”

“I’m not cutout for politics. I’m a nomad.”

“Maybe so, but you turned this one horse town into something when everybody thought it was going down the tubes.”

“And folks mistake me for a bum.”

“Who cares what they think, you gave us light, heck I tried doing good and it got me canned.”

“You’re out of work?” He asked with a bit too much pep.

“Well, yes but that’s beside the point.”

“Today’s your lucky day.”

“How so?”

“Would you be willing to sweat for a buck?”

“You better believe it.”

\*\*\*

For a slob like me running a treadmill was hard enough, but when you added a peanut gallery it was nerve-racking. Murphy sent me to the Druckers, an older couple who lived on the top floor of a split level. They were from the Greatest Generation, born and bred on cabbage, kielbasa, and radio. With the aid of bifocals, bicarb, and a solid chair they could read for hours at a stretch. At their age, a row of candles didn’t cut the mustard which is why I was sent over to sweat for them. They were so fixed on my discombobulated form trundling their treadmill that they didn’t

even bother reading their papers, instead they stared at me for the first couple of hours, passed out then woke up again when my relief runner replaced me.

It was pathetic how many more watts of energy my relief runner spat out. I glowered on the sidewalk, in awe of my replacement's bio-rhythmic arm-swing, my view truncated by a half-drawn Venetian blind. She had gorgeous knees and jump-roper legs, both laces undone.

By the time I made it home I was bushed. Dinner was an afterthought. I collapsed in bed with my clothes still on.

The next morning I snuck out while Bertha was still in the shower. My jowls were scruffy, unevenly hirsute, a soul patch without a soul, but I didn't want to wait for the bathroom to be free and get spurned again by my better half. So I skedaddled. The day was ripe with hope. Before I left, I had myself a quick swig of orange juice. The Tropicana was down to its last few pulps so I needed to fill the carton with tap water before hiding it in the fridge.

Then the footsteps came and I was foiled by frugality. Bertha caught me red-handed, the tap still gushing into the sink. She had a towel around her waist and her hair still dripping, but I felt like the naked one. She cast her eyes narrow, aloof, two emeralds dumbfounded by this homunculus slouching beside her. Before the twins were born, I used to bring her fresh-squeezed juice and croissant in bed. I pictured her now shoving the rind in my face. She didn't say a word, but grabbed some bread from the pantry and then went over to the toaster and prepared a bachelorette's breakfast and I stared at the crumbs on the sleek, alabaster countertop.

\*\*\*

After the Smindacks hired their second Miller my family gave me the cold shoulder, the cold pasta, the cold everything. "Why can't we have a little luxury?" Bertha said and I told her money was tight and besides Barney Smindack could afford a little luxury since he was making mucho mullah selling batteries. He got his hands on a large stash. There wasn't a store within miles that had any. Barney only saw you by appointment, his stash holed up in the trunk of his Skylark.

The possibility of more Blackouts loomed. Everybody was shitting bricks. Bertha, hands on her diaphanous hips, informed me we needed some Goddamn light. She kept burning her herself recycling our melted candle wicks. I told her not to take the Lord's name in vain and she flipped me the bird. "What if we lived in Alaska" I told her? "No light for six months, here there's half a day's glow." That crack got me the double bird.

We had our own hideous daily grind. The twins were sick of playing Parchisi. They shunned me to my den when I tried making shadow puppets. Okay, there really wasn't enough light. I made a mental note to try puppeteering earlier in the evening, preferably by the window.

Around dinnertime, Bertha barged into the den with a head of lettuce and whomped it on top of my desk, her veiny fingers thick as a butcher's.

"What do I do with this?" I said.

"Listen buster," she said. "I've had enough of this crap. Applebee's has electricity."

"That's impossible. It would take a miracle to get enough juice into the mall."

"Who's talking about the mall? I only said Applebee's has their lights on."

We loaded everybody into the gas guzzler and drove over to the mall for a bite.

Applebee's was packed. None of the other restaurants were open even though a feint glow shimmered by Red Lobster. It was just some snot flashing his battery-operated glow pen. The line was huge. Some Miraculous Meddlers were ahead of us. I waved to Chuck, Vern, and A.J. Chuck kept mumbling, "It's a miracle." He sounded like he was chanting the German Chancellor's name. A.J. shrugged. He was more concerned about where the kitchen had been stocking its beef since the eighth day of the Blackout.

The whole hullabaloo turned out to be Murphy's Millers at the gym, catty-corner to Applebee's, supplying all the juice.

"Eureka, it's a miracle," I said to Vern. I'm a terrible liar, but I had to play dumb.

We moseyed over to the corner to get a better view of the runaholics, the spinners, the bikers, and the nautilus junkies, all of them sweating buckets. There too was a line snaking out the front door. A bald guy came out with a clipboard signup sheet for the next shift and the line wavered. Two fatsos cut the line.

I laughed right then because I knew the really dumb inspiration behind Murphy's energy-siphoning scheme came from the bet he lost with his then pregnant wife that she couldn't brown a Pop Tart while jogging on their homespun treadmill.

For a brief moment, I felt like a useful member of Humankind whose only real shortcoming was being a bit shy, but then my Pakistani-stitched, rayon shirt didn't fit so swell and my gabardines felt like they were shrinking on me. The muggy night air made the back of my ears itch and my jockey briefs bunched. Superheroes never get wedgies. That's what fills them with moxie. I mooned over the fact that it was Murphy Montana who was the real savior. And then I felt like the inside of an empty soy sauce packet.

"Number forty-five," somebody called and I broke from my muzzy trance. Applebee's decided, out of the goodness of their franchise-bloated heart to let my family get a bellyache from their grease pit. Yay, for us and our turn to stuff our outer borough faces with trans fat-soused wings and chicken waffles and whatever looked good on the menu. Bertha undid the purse in her lips. She was neither smiling nor snarling so I took this as a good thing. The twins rushed ahead and grabbed ketchup bottles off

nearby tables and the hostess played the cheery gum-cracker she was born to be.

We had a booth by the window. I let everybody secure their spots before climbing in. Nothing quite like the feel of synthetic plastic under your buns to cool you on an otherwise sweltering night. I knew this meal was going on my already maxed out credit card and that I would only be able to make the minimum payment for the next eleven years, but at least I had a plan. At least we were together.

The twins gobbled their chicken tenders like princes. Bertha touched my knee under the table and made me tremble. I hadn't felt so frisky since the time we were stupid teenagers, bumping and grinding in the old Dodge Duster. We ordered a deluxe bacon cheeseburger and took turns feeding each other onion rings and fries and then we split a mudpie. If I had a massive coronary right then I could've made peace with myself.

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Two days later *The Glendale Register* put out an article with Murphy's mug shot plastered on the front page and the nameless staff reporter went on to say that Montana was the genius responsible for harnessing all the local athletic energy and doing what the Electric Co. could only dream of. Mavericks like Murphy made the world go round and the Electric Co. was an outdated sham that sucked the blood out of the taxpayers and it was a monopoly in some ways even though it really wasn't. I didn't have to read much further to realize the ramifications of such an article. No way was the Electric Co. going to sit back idly while a bunch of do-gooder scabs replaced them. But, what about the little guy like me. Why was I a pawn in all of this? I was only making chump change and I couldn't even enjoy the sweaty floorshow the Murphmeister had spawned because it was a luxury completely out of my budget.

The writing was on the wall. I'd be out of another job. But, who was going to take care of me. Montana could run off to Montana for all I cared, but he'd still leave behind his filthy scent. I lamented the fact that my one shining moment might have been that last supper at Applebee's. Then the light bulb flickered.

I marched down to the Electric Co. and grabbed the first no-neck I could find shirking on his coffee break. I told him everything I knew, how I helped Murphy. Sure I embellished, for the sake of slant, but I gave the no-neck a pretty good idea where he could ascertain the whereabouts of one Murphy Montana and then I left, thereabouts.

It didn't take long for all the lights to go back on. Streetlamps that never had juice glowed like ditch lights. Whatever caused the lousy Blackout was anybody's guess. Nobody from the Electric Co. ever called to thank me even though I've sent them numerous letters and left dozens of groupie-length voicemails. I won't deny part of the reason was the slim hope I might one day have a job for life. You could be as dumb as a busted light

bulb and it didn't matter one elbow macaroni what you did short of peeing on the mayor's toothbrush your job was iron-clad safe. Odds were against me. I was meant to suffer like a Christian or Cutco Knife salesman. Rumor had it that Murphy went back to teaching Shop Class. Old Jimbo from the Miraculous Meddlers was still at the helm of his meddling and had even launched himself as a human cannonball into a Planned Parenthood meeting post. He was recovering from his third degree burns and I had better things to do then sneeze my head off delivering a cone of get well flowers.

Now I run the treadmill in the privacy of our own home, I really do need to get into better shape and the twins toss pennies at me. The smell of pot roast fills the house. My belly grumbles, but I keep chugging on the treadmill. Bertha flashes me the lace nightgown underneath her bathrobe. If I can keep the twins out of her hair till dinner's ready, I'll finally get my happy ending. She stoops over to check on the pot roast in the broiler then pokes her head between her legs licking her chops. Onward Christian soldiers!

# Esteban Rodriguez

## Clothesline

Our Sunday silhouettes hang like used rope from old west gallows, and I study how the plastic pins hoist Pa from his beltless waist, the scabs of cracked cement patched around his knees and thighs, denim dripping water at the pace of leaky faucets. All afternoon, I've watched that pair of Levi's dry beside his wrinkled work shirts: brown, button-downs he wears to building sites every day, drenched in waves of heat and dirt, a résumé of sweaty stains not even soap can wash away. Back and forth, his disembodied arms sway between the droopy lines, caught inside Ma's white and chubby blouses, each unbuttoned, tangled as the tipsy wind flaps him closer, closer. I swing on the T-shaped pole while Ma tugs down the wires, puts us up one by one, three lives strung like broken Christmas lights, the Valley sun tanning padded bras, soggy socks, a bed sheet blotched with my impulsive piss, beige brittle fabric I use to drape my body with, pretend to mute my parent's arguments beneath the pillowcase; how the first sneaks up with water, electric, late payments for a used Ford that won't start most mornings. And in between the slammed doors and counters, I think about the horde of toys nestled in other boys' backyards, or the shiny dryers in Sears catalogs Ma collects. I imagine if memory is anything like cotton, it's cheaply made, quick to fade, and thin enough to dry itself away, erase the stains it wasn't meant to hold, as our lives unfold like Ma lays out our clothes, grabs me from the pole, and again, I smell the beaten bar of soap on her puckered palms, defeat she tried scrubbing off till her fingers bled, till she made herself believe, like I believed, this was the week we'd start fresh.



# Lesley Clinton

## Careful

A rare ice day. We tend to things  
gone still or stuck, add heat—but slow,  
or else a crack might burrow in  
and root apart what's whole, reduce  
it down to side and side. Night frost  
has punched the windshield white. You run  
a tepid lip of water on  
the glass to clear a vision of  
the road ahead. But we don't speak—  
words now would bundle cold in cold  
or boil too high to safely melt  
this opaque pause we're raging in.

# Nick Bateman

## Cast-off

(After Jeffers)

At Mark's funeral, my cousin said to me  
that rather than being buried,  
when he dies we should stuff his body  
into the smallest, cheapest casket we could find.  
"You have to buy a casket  
anyway, right? It's the law.  
Say your goodbyes. Wrench me in there—  
break my legs, if you have to.  
Put the casket  
on the shore of the lake  
(it should float, right?).  
Light it on fire.  
Push hard."

## Eli Edelson

### Selections from *Fight Nights at the Menagerie*

#### *The Sheep*

Near Istanbul, Turkey. July 7th, 2005

It was only the sixth day off my mother's teat and the grass was good; cool, tough, and satisfying to chew. I found it was easy to get lost in it, the rhythm of crushing and grinding. The days were getting hotter and this day was particularly toasty as the sun continued its ascent. Luckily my father's large body shaded me while I fed. Can you imagine that there were actually a few of the herd who were dressed in black? I wouldn't be able to bear wearing dark wool in this heat, soaking up every single ray of light. Where do they get the energy?

This was what I was thinking about when the Leader started to move away from us. You always knew when the Leader moved because his actions rippled through all of us until you found your legs moving in the same direction. It wasn't long before my mother, father, and my two older brothers began trotting after him and the rest. With my short legs, I was the last behind. I remember shouting in my head that I was always the last behind! When would I start trotting as fast as everyone else? Then I realized that the Leader was taking us in a strange direction, going with the wind. The wind always went towards the cliff.

The ground turned from grass to stone and I realized we were walking down the slope. I did not think about the cliff as much as the fence before it. I tried to look past my mother and father to see the Leader. Sure enough, He was approaching the barrier. I thought the fence would stop Him as it always had. Then I watched as He plowed over it without pause. The wire took only a fraction of the wool He, and everyone else, was stripped of each month. I had yet to be stripped by the way, but I had seen it happen with regularity. From what I understood, that day it was the Leader's turn to be taken away and sheared, an uneasy and directionless day for us all.

By the time I walked over the trampled wire we were full-on running. This was the fastest we had ever moved as a group and I could feel the wind between all of our bodies. I was galloping over dirt I had looked at all my life but never had the chance to feel under hoof. We heard the white-eyed creature's roaring from behind but not one of us looked back. I didn't even care. The slope was very steep. I could see right to the cliff's edge and our Leader was almost there, but I was still struggling to keep up.

In what felt like a slow blink the Leader hopped off the ledge, and as far back as I was I could hear His warbling cry as if it were right in my

ears. The sound washed through my body like the sun's heat and I began galloping faster than I ever could inside our wired circle. My parents, my brothers, we were all galloping. We had never been so powerful! We began to yell and shriek like our Leader continued to do as he disappeared from view. I watched as the first thick row of us went over and the shouting erupted.

We became a waterfall flowing over the cliff. Soon it would be my turn. My parents and brothers, a few trots in front of me, careened over. One moment they were dashing their hooves across the stone, the next moment they took to the air. I couldn't hear the white-eyed creatures' noises anymore but I was impatient to go in case they could catch up. I wanted to feel exactly what everyone else was feeling. Then I felt a gust of hot wind blow the dust from my coat as I leapt over the edge.

Nothing had ever been so incredible. I was howling and all noise besides that of my own voice disappeared. The wind tried to compete but was muted. The world had opened up from a big circle of grass to the infinite: infinite meadow, infinite sky, infinite time felt falling. Every one of my coat's hairs rose up. I looked down to see the mountain of my entire herd below me, whiter than my mother's milk. Before I knew I was real again I felt the thud of the mound of others below me.

The world had gone from sunny to dark as I tumbled down, over what could have been my brothers, mother, father, the Leader. I did not know. Almost as fast as the fall itself, the tumble was over and I felt the salty flat slap of ground. It took a few moments to orient myself but I remember thinking all the while that this was the greatest moment of my life. I stumbled away from where I had landed and turned around to look everything over.

They really had made a mountain of themselves. A snowy peak with a few solid red streams trickling down, each one of the herd indistinguishable from the others except for three black spots, like three eyes staring back (those were the three black coated ones that had been among us). Before I began walking away I just barely noticed a bunch of those shadowy, white-eyed creatures standing at the spot we had flown from. They were making noises like coyotes, but weak and far away. I knew they would not follow me down here. I had been gasping with excitement but it turned to laughter as I watched them jump up and down in place, as if they were practicing to follow.

The sun looked different, farther away and softer. I trotted away purring to myself. After a while I put my head down to the grass, which stretched on forever in different shades of green and, I remember, it really did taste different.

## *The Hunter*

He wandered the woods that afternoon with his shotgun looking for something to kill. The sky was gray, the forest cold, the air wet. He heard thunder whispering miles away but when he looked up he saw only a gray quilt, no rain or lightning. Yet everything was wet. He walked the cleared trails of the park for an hour before knowingly wandering off the path. "Straight from headquarters, the new program we implemented has become so effective that we've been forced to eliminate your position." He trudged on the soft mud-leaf mix of the forest floor and occasionally walked into large, stagnant pools that colored his hiking boots dark brown. "It is unfortunate, but we're moving in a different direction now." He had carefully picked his killer's outfit before leaving his house, he had carefully picked his gun, he had carefully picked his mindset. Thick, black leather jacket, not smooth, and padded blue jeans and a brown leather belt with a large, jangly buckle. The only gun he owned, his father's old gun, he held in his hands yet it was still carefully picked. Winchester Model 101 Sporting Shotgun with high grade glossed walnut frame. He liked that it was walnut, some of the trees he walked among were walnut. His mindset was raw and dense and detached, perhaps immovable. What a killer's mindset should be, he thought, as he felt the cold air lick his skin.

As he walked he imagined shooting a squirrel or a deer or a bird. He thought that imagining these kills made him pure, sharp, and hard. He carried his gun comfortably, enjoying the weight and slight strain on his arm muscles. He breathed the fresh air in and thought about why he didn't just live in the woods, why he had worked that god-awful job at all. "We are moving in a different direction." Still moving. His boots sank a little into the brown soft mud-leaf mix and he smiled. He wore this thin smile through the cold, wet air as if it was something natural.

The trees were tall and their tops seemed to be lost in the grayness above them, and this comforted him. He felt that this cold tangled world, where nothing happened, was much more real than his house and his job. He didn't see anyone and he didn't feel anything about that. He wasn't on the trails anyways. It started to rain a little bit, coating the walnut gloss with small drops. He imagined himself as a bear with moisture gathering on his fur. He looked at his watch and it told him he'd been walking for two hours. It felt longer. He didn't want to go home, but the rational bastard inside of him shook itself awake and slapped his gut-mind and said,

"It'll be dark soon you pathetic son of a bitch. You think you belong out here? You're fucking dense. Get back, get out. Go back home and jerk off, if that'll make you feel better. Get out of these cold-as-shit woods." His thin smile faded to just teeth, gritted. "Moving. A very different direction." Still moving. He decided to walk around in the darkening world of the uncivilized, the four legged, the short lived, for a bit longer and then head back home. He saw some small, orb-like birds hopping

among the branches of the trees above him. He saw them and he wanted to shoot them but he didn't: too small, too pathetic, not enough guts. He'd be leaving soon and he started to feel the tremble of an inner fool so he figured he'd only shoot something big, something with eyes as big as his, if he could find it. So he saw some squirrels and birds and chipmunks and he knew his gun would eviscerate, blow away, annihilate, all those ignorant little things. But he wanted to see the gore and breathe the copper smell in the cold, wet air. So he walked and he pumped his shotgun and he walked and the cold, mud-water seeped in through his laces and dampened his thin business socks.

He heard a rustling in some close-by, thick-leaved bushes so he pointed his shotgun forwards, started walking slow with his knees bent and his mind blank and his stomach tight. There was rustling and snorting and breath being launched, thick and fleshy white, into the air. He saw so much movement in the nearby bushes he thought he couldn't handle it inside of his stomach. He put his back up against the crumbling, blackened bark of a tree and strained his neck to view the crackling bush. There were two deer and they were fucking. The young male, with a pitiful rack of about four points, was on top of an older female deer and he was fucking her. He tilted his shotgun up so the shot would plow right into the side of the buck; it would hit him perpendicular to the lungs. He breathed out he kept breathing out and saw his breath float in front of his face and saw the deer's breath mix in front of their faces, thicker than his own.

The gun fired and it bucked into his shoulder and a thousand pellets of skeet shot flew into the thick skin of the doe and the young buck and he heard them snort in anger and pain, de-mount, and run in separate directions not even visibly bleeding. He looked down at his gun, as they crashed away into the low hanging, drooping world, and he thought about how pathetic his gun was: not a hunting gun, barely a skeet gun packing tick-sized grapeshot. He thought about how pathetic he was and he wanted to shoot himself through the back of his head but realized the gun didn't even pack enough shot for that. He laid his gun down on the soft-mud leaf mixture of the forest floor, right next to what could have been a baby walnut tree, and walked back to find the path wearing an Atlas-like slump. After a few minutes of walking he realized his hair was soaked and he was cold and the thought of suicide seemed harsh to him. He just wanted to go home, to have a drink and sleep as long as he wanted. As he neared the plowed pebbled path he came upon the young male deer who was sitting on a pile of leaves. He could see a few of the little scrapes of the buck shot on the deer's flank but he knew they were only skin deep. He then realized that the buck's right eye was surrounded by tears- closed shut, from pain. When the buck noticed him it flashed its eye open and he saw a sharp metallic glint, like a small sun that had fallen below the treetops- a bright little copper pellet lodged right in the cornea, and the man began to sob on his knees letting the cold brown water of the forest soak through his padded jeans.

## *Writer's Block*

I walked home and the streetlights lit up my chest. Music jetted from my iPod like steam into my ears and burned away the cataract covering my brain. The beat melted everything away as I creased the receipt for my new headphones. My hands moved to the music: electronic, low, a song called “dystopia utopia.” It brought me to another plane. I walked between shadowy squares and lamp lit circles cruising on a bass, staring at everything. Just as I had hoped, thoughts waterfalled through my mind and tingled in my spine:

A woman gives birth and when she looks down she sees that it's a shadow and finally she realizes she is the sun. Who could the father be?

A boy on a swing watches a girl pull a kite, which electrifies in the air. The child realizes he has left the swing when he feels hot wind on his face. Could he fly?

A man tries bungee jumping for the first time. His rope snaps but he survives and courses down the river. Where could he end up?

A thug waits behind a lamppost with a switchblade. He approaches an unsuspecting ambler and takes his iPod away, but not before shooting the knife towards the ambler's eye almost striking it as he brushed by, smiling. Sweat gathers all over the ambler's skin. He is suddenly so far away from his nearby house. If the knife didn't connect, why is everything dark?

I stood there for a moment, gasping. The lamppost, along with every other light on the block, had gone off. City wide black out. My back hurt from the weight of my bag and the newfound silence that replaced the song started to caulk my mind. I began to walk again. At first, there were only the sounds of my footsteps. The path home was a straight walk, so at least I did not need to navigate. After what felt like a block's worth of wading through the darkness, I realized my eyes had adapted to the moonlight. The pavement and hedges looked soft and chalk covered. The wind kept a constant tune alongside the intermittent sound of tires passing somewhere nearby. I arrived at the corner of my apartment and decided I did not want to go inside yet.

I closed my eyes and thought about how much writing there was to do that I started crying. My little revelations from before had dissipated, like water on hot pavement. I allowed myself a single sob out loud and the moment that it launched into the night it seemed to ruin everything, piercing through the sounds of shaking leaves. I heard movement in the

hedge behind me and turned around. About a foot in front of me, almost masked by the leaves, was a baby barn owl. It was the size of my fist and it did not look scared. Its eyes absorbed the moon, turning the white to gold. We stared at each other until it popped out of the hedge and darted down the street and then above the trees. It looked like a soft comet, arcing away into the night.

I finally went back into my apartment and for a moment I was blind in my own place. My computer was dead. If I had a typewriter instead I could be a genius. But I was tired. So I went to sleep and as I sank into the cool of my bed I hoped I would dream of that owl.

### *Wading*

Every evening Eric went to get gas for his car. After the commute and after dinner, before bedtime for his kids, he drove for ten minutes till he hit his station. It always glowed bright and green in the medium-dark of the suburbs. He'd been doing this for five years now, since they moved. He didn't really need the gas. It was only five dollars and fifty cents worth a night. Every outing while he drove there he thought about why he did it, why he did the self-service, smelled the gasoline inject into the air, and returned home. The trip was quiet, with no radio, and when he pulled out of his house, leaving his sleepy kids and usually tired wife behind, and then finally up to the station and out of the car, he thought about how he was not unlike a deep sea diver coming up for breath. Not in the suffocating sense, Eric thought, but instead it was like the diver knew he had to pull himself out of that incredible, weighty world to catch his breath and he couldn't wait to dive back down to feel the silky currents on his body and the cold pressure that kept him alive; but the breath kept him surfacing every once in a while—every night from seven thirty to seven fifty to be exact.

That night it was cold and snow barely let down, and as Eric stepped out of the car the green light greeted his skin. The attendant named Alonso walked up to him,

“Mr. Longman, how are you doing tonight?”

“I'm fine,” the pause, almost eye contact, “yourself?”

“I'm doing good, windowwash?”

“I think I'm okay tonight. Thanks though.”

“No problem, no problem.”

Eric was watching Alonso walk into the harsh light of the convenience store and get back behind the counter when a small black car sped into place next to him as he stood curiously with a nozzle in his hands.

Two tall men stepped out of the car, both grinning and wearing slim leather vests underneath baggy button downs like urban cowboys and Eric knew immediately that they were killers. It had been a long time since Eric



drove with men like that but their presence was unmistakable; they gave off something like pheromones for those like them, stale and fiery in Eric's nostrils. He had wondered many times whether his kids would notice his own smell, or whether they were ignorant of it, and would be permanently unaware once they left home—a thought that supplied frequent nightmares to Eric. These killers had chiseled jaws and very pale skin. He looked at their bright red eyes and realized that they were on drugs that kept them from sleeping for days. One paid all his attention to Eric while the other glided like a hammerhead into the light of the store.

This one's teeth were streaked with yellow, "Howdy."

Eric wished he still kept a gun in his car, "Hello."

"Please, don't let me interrupt." He nodded to the nozzle in Eric's hands.

Eric didn't move. The hammerhead reached the door. There were the electronic chimes of the door opening. There were never chimes with the hotel safe rooms, Eric recalled. He and the man stared at each other. He decided to take this in a different direction.

"So, this must be your third or fourth one in a row."

The man showed his grime striped teeth in a grin, "You're sharp man. Fourth in three days."

Eric heard the sound of shouting in the store, "You getting any sleep?"

"Sleep is like drowning. And this fucking place—" the man was interrupted by the crisp report of two gunshots from inside the convenience store. The man started to reach under his vest. Eric felt his hand click down as he shoved the nozzle into the man's face and pushed him back. The man gasped gasoline and before he fell down Eric had snatched the revolver from his vest with his left hand, keeping his right hand on the nozzle and drenching the man. The hammerhead rushed out of the store. Eric pulled the man up, who was now whimpering, and positioned him as a shield, gun to his temple. The nozzle lay on the ground oozing like a neglected garden hose. The hammerhead leveled his pistol at them and shouted,

"Drop the fucking piece right now!"

Eric couldn't shoot this man, he realized. The gun was covered in gasoline and could burst into flames if he were to fire it. Eric shouted back, "No. Drop yours and go." There was a silence that lasted so long Eric felt as if he were treading in it. As each man waited for something to happen a seven year old memory dove back to him. He was sprinting through a glossed marble lobby. He was leading his own pack outside to their apprehension and his own freedom. Some two-week-course security guard dressed in dull blue fired one shot. Eric saw, for the thousandth time, the youngest man in their group named Lowell Evanson, aged 18, fall backward and steep the marble phosphorescent red. Eric's own impending freedom had kept him from taking the life of the dull blue murderer.

The man suddenly spit up some gasoline and muttered, "There's nothing you can do. Why don't you just let me go?"

“Because you wouldn’t let me go back home.” And as he said that Eric suddenly felt his chest collapse into itself and he could not breathe and he tried to breathe and he could not breathe as he felt the air, speckled with snow that was colored green by the gas station lights, crush down on him and force tears out of his eyes and that pressure went into his fingers and he pressed down on the revolver’s trigger and the little metal weight exploded in his hand.

There were four bullets in the gun. One flew on its trajectory out of the barrel, escaping the demolition it had ignited, and hit the hammerhead below his hairline. The second rocketed from its resting place in the cylinder, along with most of the cylinder itself, into the throat of the gasoline soaked man. The third and fourth bullets bounced back through Eric’s hand; one disappeared into the darkness and the other fell to the ground with a clink after passing through Eric’s abdomen.

At once all three men fell to their backs. For a moment Eric thought he had been displaced into an action movie, with the impending, mandatory explosion to be outrun. He jumped to his feet, ready to escape, before he felt the soaring fury of pain in his gut and hand, which was missing half its form. The pain was alchemizing quickly into blanket sleepiness. He noticed that there was no fire, other than the one flaring in his hand. He had nothing to run from. Eric kneeled as he struggled to keep conscious. He only had to wait now until he awoke as some sort of News 7 hero in a hospital bed, having been kept warm by his family. Eric looked up at the night sky which was made opaque by the medium-light of the suburbs. The air carried a lapping quiet interrupted only by the whispered breaths that Eric could hear himself producing. Each breath hummed in his head like a conversation held underwater. Each breath hummed like the starting of his car’s engine with a full tank. Each breath hummed like the sound of his children sleeping. Each breath hummed like the strange lights of the gas station that covered everything. Eric lay on the ground and felt himself sink down until he touched the still sand of the ocean’s bed.

### *The Runner vs. "The Most Beautiful Great City Left in the World"*

Back home he had always run. Home was somewhere in Indiana, where the cornfields were rust and the trees debris. There, where the crimson silos opened up to the sky, space was like a rabid horse allowed to run itself into the desert, forever. This was where John normally ran. Across train tracks and broken pavement and near homes with people resting under old quilts. He ran to keep sane. Then he moved to the great city—Chicago. A new age required a new job and so he ran from Indiana, finally.

In Chicago, the streets were too large for a human. The steel and glass corralled emptiness, patting space down into its behemoth lap.

Streets with names like Ohio, Congress, State, and Michigan, names that compressed the vastness of America into the city's own grid. It was on these streets that John kept running. He had to—to keep sane. At first he didn't mind the fresh crowds; he dodged between them imagining them to be walking-trees stumbling down a concrete valley. But all the while, John heard a humming anger held in the air, from something kept in. When he stared out his small apartment windows into the eight-floor atmosphere he imagined himself an elk staring at a taxidermied mountain lion.

Every day John ran and every day he changed his route because there were an infinite number of routes and that had never been the case back home. One dark morning when the air was colder than inside an industrial freezer he ran alongside a construction site. Bright copper plates were stacked near pyramids of concrete blocks while workers moved over the beaten ground. John ran into a temporary tunnel made to protect pedestrians from falling materials. Inside, it was dim and crowded and John wanted to get out as quickly as possible but as he tried to move through a particularly thick group of people, like an air bubble passing through tar, his foot slipped down a half-foot hole in the walkway and his ankle snapped. He gasped and then there was a lot of pain. He did not ask for help. He limped to a hospital.

For months, John stayed in his apartment. Time turned sour and mold grew in the air, air that was like the drippings of the city's pipes. Somewhere inside that time John forgot where he was and he imagined himself delivered back home, wrapped like a plaster corpse. And the casts were eventually taken off but his carpet remained Indiana concrete, his soft couch its factories, his walls dissolved to drag ways. He stayed in Indiana under a suffocating old quilt. Then one night John dreamt. He dreamt of a city alive with arteries that pumped platinum, and sewers that transported bright gasoline to each and every machine; the city's face frozen in a rictus as it breathed out tannic fumes.

John woke covered in sweat with the cloudy impulse to run. He went to his front door, but no farther. The space outside pulsed with anger. John needed to run, to drown out the terror-sweat on his forehead. But he could not go outside, he couldn't swim in that. So he rushed to his fire-escape and threw himself down the stairs, into the sepia currents of the street lamps. By the time he got to the bottom of the alley the world was dark, smelling of wet gravel and old brick. For over a mile the alley stretched uninterrupted in narrow gloom. The walls, barely visible, had a crumbled texture that appeared so weak as to be inching away from him. They were nothing like the flawless, towered golems of Chicago's face. He was standing somewhere new and his sweat suddenly felt life-giving in the wind, his breath a torch to guide him. And of course, no one in sight. So John began to run, gliding across potholes and mud piles and old clothing turned to moss, his ankle pulsed with a dull pain that drove him faster. He sped into nothing and through it and looked up at the night sky as he ran.

## *The Girl on the Beach*

I saw her through the rearview mirror, the sun inconsiderately bright on her face, and I decided I would name her Francesca. Her elegant nose, slightly beady eyes, the way she tried to not squint in clear defiance of the sun, she was Francesca indeed. I watched her drive close behind me for over fifteen blocks. Only in a dream world would she be following me for some unknown romantic reason. We made eye contact in my rearview mirror twice, and I knew in my bones that she had absolutely no interest in my existence. But Francesca's utter confidence was interesting. I imagined she was going on a date, a casual Thursday evening date with a familiar man. Perhaps even one she'd been with before. Something about her perfume would make him twinge. What would it smell like? She took a right and disappeared into the ever-flowing, concrete oblivion of Los Angeles. I was left feeling that I'd gotten to know another person I'd never see again.

Before I rounded the final street to my quiet, carpeted home, I saw a girl no older than twelve alone on a bus bench. As my car drifted quietly down the hill, she tilted her head up at the sun, falling like a red mirror and, as if the light were toxic, a glimmer of tears appeared. Her eyes met mine and suddenly she was falling into her own tears, quicksand tears, and she fell like a tiny comet through a lake of ice, watched by smirking humans who believed in survival of the fittest and in this elastic moment she turned away and stood up and I couldn't help but notice that gravity had finally caused the drops to dive down her face. Her mouth hung ajar as I strayed from her sight.

The thud of the low speed collision pushed me forwards. My forehead tapped the windshield. The outside world was an opaque spider web through the circle of cracks I had touched. I couldn't see. I rushed from my seat. A large man whose car I had hit walked towards me with a slow gait and sympathetic expression. He wore mechanic's overalls with a tattered name tag that read Matt. I felt the slightest trickle of blood glide down my forehead as I realized that the girl was gone and I had never even given her a name.

# Edward O'Casey

## Gestational Utterances

Listen, Mother. Your heartbeat mingles  
with the innate rhythms of all things,  
the pulse of magma pushing

under the mountain's surface, rivers  
carving their course across the skin,  
the dull murmur: fate's babbling breath  
—tepid wind that blows past everyone

—

inevitably, we respond  
to the twin vacuums  
of love and hate,  
we wish in those fountains  
and circulate in the undertow—

*to overflow with joy,*  
the gift of virgin  
daughters  
to our drunken sons,

*to overflow with murder*  
arms locked before  
the courthouse, spitting  
Molotov at the butchers—

to anyone who won't speak Hemocyte,  
both are nothing more than  
overflowing with blood.

# Tom Pescatore

## Ticket is a one way gig

at the forefront of the  
descending universe I wait for you  
the same way I've always waited,  
my body aging, my mind reaching like  
bending light leans toward the ascension-  
engine of the godhead in the  
awakening that is near—oh, I am  
spoiled by sleep that is nearer, easier  
makes my lies sweeter  
in Syracuse the streets are white  
in dc they are strewn with homeless dreaming  
they don't make sense

I plan on waiting out the wind,  
to watch the layers mesh  
in contrail skies,  
to suck the life from chemically laced water fountain  
speed,

I plan to get a ticket on that greyhound  
headed for the center of universal  
truth.

# Michael Royce

## Hazard

Tucked behind a table at the back of the Angry Bear Saloon, Turner nursed a beer. He sat alone and unnoticed under the snarling head of a cougar mounted on the wall above him, its fur mottled with rot and teeth yellow with age. Without lifting his head, he listened to a gray-looking fellow try to impress two men with stories about the great Miner Strike of 1931.

“Better believe Joe Turner’s kilt some men,” the old man said. “Not just scabs, neither.” The two men downed their shots in a single gulp. As he negotiated his departure, the talker braced himself in the doorway. He tapped his temple, shook his head from side to side and announced to no one in particular, “Yessir, that Turner done been born with a murdering disposition.” After this pronouncement, he lurched through the door, leaving his words hanging in the air like swamp mist.

As he digested the old drunk’s words, Turner’s eyes glinted and his lips pulled back into an undertaker’s smile. *Yep, better to be feared than respected.* He extracted his prized buck knife from his pocket and locked it open with a snap. On the table, he made a neat pile of nail clippings, dead skin and peels of dirt cleaned from under his jagged nails. The chrome on the knife was dull and the wooden grip scarred from years of daily use, but he kept the blade honed and ready. Staring at the last swallow of beer in his glass, he brooded over a recent torment.

At breakfast a few days earlier, Turner had watched Brenda, his first and favorite child, as she flipped pancakes and stirred the fatback. He’d marked the hint of sweat on the fine hair above her lips and the fullness of her figure. Like a revelation, he’d seen she wasn’t a girl anymore, but a woman bursting with promise of sweetness. Heat washed through him. Catching himself, he forced his gaze away. He wasn’t sure what he felt, but he knew it wasn’t right. His fists knotted with self-disgust in his lap. “Hurry up with those cakes, gal,” he’d snapped.

Shaking his head to put this troubled memory out of mind, Turner picked up his glass and downed the remaining beer. Without comment to anyone, he slapped money for three beers down on the counter and departed into the night for the long walk home.

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The next morning, Brenda accompanied her pa on their monthly trip to pick up supplies for the family. They walked together on the path out of Turner Hollow across the bridge to the main road where Turner kept his old pick-up, its springs sagging and tires bald. As they drove into

Hazard, the county seat, Turner asked, "Need anything?" Brenda heard no gentleness in his question.

"No, Pap," Brenda said. "Ma sewed up a new dress from that material we bought a couple months ago." A suggestion of a grin crossed her face. "People'll get to thinking I'm a princess if I wear something new and fancy each month." She looked at her father to see if her humor had amused him. She saw his mouth quiver into a partial smile and knew she was the lucky one. No one else in the family would dare talk to him in that jokey sort of way.

As they visited different stores to pick up various items, she noticed a young man trailing after them like a stray dog in hope of a pat. She smiled to herself because he so clearly was waiting to find a chance to talk to her alone. He must have asked around about her and her family because when he approached in front of the dentist's office where she sat on bench waiting for her father, he said, "Howdy, Miss Brenda." She turned to look up at him. "How do you know my name?" Her eyes skittered under his gaze. Although she was 18, she didn't have experience with boys courting. Their house was too isolated and her father didn't encourage suitors.

"I'm Samuel from up to Carver. Elbert Fugate's boy; my gramp is Josiah Elweh."

"Daddy's getting his teeth worked on." She struggled to recover her composure.

"I seen you around; been wanting to introduce myself."

Brenda knew she ought to maintain a dignified reserve, but her full lips curled into a smile anyway. "Pa don't like for me to talk to strangers."

"Well, that's why I done introduced myself, so we ain't strangers no more." As they chatted, Samuel did most of the talking. "I'd like to come calling down at yer place," he said finally.

Brenda didn't have a chance to answer because she saw her father approach, his face swollen from having two teeth yanked. She didn't know how much of their conversation he'd overheard, but she saw how he fixed Samuel with a vicious look, like a treed raccoon deciding whether to claw your face off or jump. Turner took her by the arm and steered her away quickly.

"We was just talking," she wanted to say, but she knew her pa wouldn't take to that kindly, even if she was his favorite. I'll never see that boy again, she thought, because I didn't get a chance to tell him where we live. She dragged her feet as she followed her father to the car, weighted down with sorrow that she'd never meet any boy who might take her out from under the iron hand of her dad.

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Samuel, however, was not easily discouraged. He'd pestered the shopkeepers where Brenda and her father had stopped until he'd pieced



together where they lived.

That following Saturday, he whistled as he walked from his home in Carver, a community of thirty houses straggling along two dirt roads, out to the main highway. Although his family worried he was searching too far from where he grew up and the kinship ties that bound the Fugates to others throughout Breathitt County, he was 22, country-lean and too headstrong to let them interfere with his intention to go courting.

The morning air felt crisp and leaves had already turned brilliant red and yellow. At the paved road, a small trickle of automobiles belonging to well-to-do businessmen drove south to Hazard or north to Jackson, the county seat of Breathitt. Samuel figured to catch a ride and was about half right. A man wearing a black fedora pulled his new '49 Ford over and motioned for Samuel to hop in but let him off with five miles to walk.

By late morning, Samuel reached the entrance to Turner Hollow, three miles south of Hazard. Without touching the handrail, he crossed the hanging bridge over the Tawasset River up into the mouth of the hollow. At a faded, grey clapboard house with a worn porch the length of the front, Samuel saw a woman staring at him silently. "Howdy, Missus, I'm looking for Joe Turner's place?"

The woman's eyes shifted up and down the hollow before she answered. "Head straight down the crick," she said. "Turn right another mile at the fork, until you reach the last house." After a hesitation, she added, "When you get close, don't be too quiet. Turner ain't fond of surprises." With that, she hustled inside.

Samuel nodded thanks at the empty porch, not set back one bit by what she'd had to say. Lots of people living up in the hollows acted peculiar. He was fixing to visit Brenda anyway, not her dad. His long legs ate up the miles, and he grinned because he was getting closer.

When he left the leafy woods, he travelled down a ridge through open grassland toward the Turner house. Nobody was outside, except two little boys mucking in the dirt of the front yard. They took turns whacking each other until they heard Samuel call out from the corner of the split-rail fence surrounding the house. For a moment, they became quiet and nothing happened.

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Then the door opened a crack and Turner stepped out, his rifle pointed toward the ground. "What you want, stranger?" Turner's gaze held Samuel in a slowly tightening vice across the distance that separated them.

"I'm here looking to pay my respects to yer daughter," Samuel said in a cracked voice. He moved gingerly into the yard. "Don't mean nothing ain't right by yer family."

Brenda stepped out on the porch beside her father. "Pap, I know this here boy. We done talked in Hazard last week. Remember, when I waited

for you outside the dentist.”

“Uh huh,” answered her pa and eased the grip on his gun a hair.

Brenda’s hands twisted up in the material of her dress. “All right and proper he acted. He come from a good family, too—the Fugates from up to Carver, not Tolbert Fugate in Jackson, nor that Brecht Fugate, who drinks too much over at Long Branch. Elbert, son to Josiah Elweh, that’s this boy’s daddy.” Her words spilled out in one long stream.

“I remember a Josiah Elweh Fugate. Preacher, ain’t he?” Turner said. He remembered the boy skulking after Brenda in Hazard and stalled to gain time to figure out what to do.

“Use to be, Mr. Turner,” Samuel replied. “He done give up on preaching long ago.” He edged across the yard, hesitating at the bottom of the steps.

“Good enough family,” Turner declared reluctantly. He reached a decision. *Better to flush out what young Fugate was up to rather than drive him away straight off.*

Samuel climbed the worn wooden steps onto the porch and extended his right hand.

Turner ignored his greeting. “Best be watching yer manners when talking to me or mine.” He spun about abruptly and re-entered the house. Glancing at his face as he closed the door behind him, his wife flinched. She and their younger daughter continued canning vegetables and remained silent. Muscles twitched under Turner’s weathered cheek.

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Samuel stuttered as he recovered from this harsh reception. “I been... uh... thinking on you a great deal this last week.” His eyes followed Brenda as she moved away from the door to sit on a wooden, hand-made swing. Turner’s lowdown meanness flew out of his mind.

“Ain’t exactly able to find the right words.” His breathing slowed. “Like my tongue been stomped and drug in the dirt.” Confusion drained from his face and he focused the full bore of his broad, country smile on Brenda.

She lifted her head and laughed. Samuel heard the sweet, high trill.

Encouraged, he commenced to gild the lily. “Yer so pretty I’m near on to 100% confused.”

Brenda blushed and lowered her face again. “You be flirting with all them big city words.”

“Flirting,” Samuel repeated indignantly. “I’m telling you nothing but God’s own truth.” He assumed a serious air. “When you be out walking, the sun must git crazy jealous,” he said, dazzled by the piercing blue of her eyes and the pink flush of her pale skin. “What with all them sunflowers turning to follow you while they pay never mind to that old sun.” In the silence that followed, Samuel thought as how that was a pretty good line.

Brenda must have believed so, too. Her lips parted with a slight tremble

and she motioned for Samuel to sit beside her on the swing. As Samuel sat, he was conscious of her body heat across the space that separated them. He longed to stroke the silky black hair cascading to her shoulders and gaze forever at the unconscious beauty of her face.

They talked and the glow of Brenda's cheeks deepened. Samuel pointed to a red-tailed hawk climbing thermals into the sky above the hills in front of them. While they watched the hawk soar, Samuel inched modestly toward Brenda; his knee grazed her dress. When she didn't move away or say anything, he took her silence to mean she liked him—at least a little. He entertained her with stories about the big northern cities where he'd worked. "People are different up there, for sure. Most everyone's got drinking water and flush toilets indoors, even poor folk." Brenda's eyes grew brighter as he described this wider world she'd never seen.

"You must be hungry," Brenda said. She entered the house and gathered up a plate of cornbread and jug of milk. As they sat together eating from the same plate, Samuel allowed his arm, which he'd draped over the back of the swing, to dip casually and touch her shoulder. At the first contact, she stiffened and he removed his arm like it'd been acting on its own.

If he stayed longer, Samuel knew it'd be dark before he reached home, but he wasn't fixing to depart. He never noticed Turner, his eyes hooded like a falcon, staring at them from the window behind the swing, listening to their words and following their movements.

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Turner stepped out onto the porch. "You oughter be leaving now." His stare would have made a rattlesnake cringe. "Night ain't going to hole up on your account."

Samuel rose, looking like he had a mouthful of words still bottled up in him. "If'n it be all right, I'd like to visit next weekend," he asked Brenda. Turning to her dad, he added, "Naturally, with yer permission."

Brenda's cheeks dimpled and she nodded yes.

Turner said, "Time to git you gone now, Fugate." He choked on his fury and the acid bile it released. He'd overheard Samuel seducing Brenda with fancy words, touching her body wherever he wanted and leering at her like he was removing her clothes one article at a time. In the warp of his imagination, he witnessed Samuel's hands descend stealthily from Brenda's shoulders to cup her breasts. Turner clenched his fist with ferocity and the snagged edges of his fingernails bit into his hands as he envisioned Samuel, triumph in his eyes, mounting Brenda.

Turner stalked to the back room. When he looked down, he saw blood seeping from his fists. He defiled my baby. His pupils expanded like a mountain lion hunting at night. He reached for his cherished thirty-aught-six hanging on the wall and stole out the backdoor. On deer tracks, he loped at an angle to the path he knew Samuel would follow until he

reached a high point above the trail where the undergrowth was thin. He sank to one knee behind an alder and concentrated to slow his breathing. The muzzle of his gun rested against the trunk of the tree as if he was waiting for a big buck to burst into the open. A noise jerked Turner to attention. Samuel appeared, walking briskly and whistling "Ghost Riders in the Sky."

The click of the trigger was soft and Samuel never turned. He fell without a sound. As the echo of the gun died, Turner stalked down the hill. He stared at the blood pooling below Samuel's head. With a shake, he broke from the spell that held him. He grabbed Samuel by the heels and dragged him off the trail, ripping the body free from the brush that ensnared it as if he was wrestling a dead deer out of the thickets onto the butchering ground. Under a copse of young maples, he rolled a small log out of the way. With his buck knife, he sharpened a stick into a crude tool. For half hour, he dug a hole with steady scoops. Then, mouthing dust to dust, he dumped Samuel into the trough. On hands and knees, he pushed the soil into the hole and covered the body. Using a leafy branch, Turner scuffed the tracks to hide where Samuel had fallen on the trail, the marks his head and torso made skidding across the ground, and where, in the end, his body was planted in the earth.

After Turner brushed the blood off the trail, he marched to a little feeder stream flowing into the Tawasset and cleaned his hands and clothes. Slowly, he checked his body to determine if it was free of stains. Then, he washed his hands again, using silt and small pebbles from the stream to scour from them the evidence of what he'd done.

When he reached home, Turner didn't talk. But his family had heard the sharp echo of his hunting rifle. His wife asked in a voice which faltered, "Was you out hunting, Joe?"

"Been watching a family of squirrels in that stand of trees over by the ridge," he said. "Tired of nothing to eat but fried baloney, beans and gravy." After a pause, he added, "Missed the little bastards, though."

Brenda listened, ashen and shaking, as her father talked. The others looked away. In the stifling quiet which followed, Brenda helped her mother prepare dinner. The family ate without speaking and went to bed early.

Before dawn the next morning, Turner set out for his winter hunting camp, high in the hills several miles and ridges from home. "Nobody interferes with my family or other possessions," he muttered. He knew death compelled revenge. There were a number of men in the Fugate clan. Just as it had been his duty to shoot young Fugate to protect Brenda's virtue, it was now their obligation to take his life in return for the boy's. They would come for him, of that he was sure; but they could not exact retribution from him, if he was not there. And the code they all lived by didn't sanction hurting women or children.

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At first light, Brenda pulled herself into the kitchen. A morning chill still dominated the room. She watched her mother tuck a hank of washed-out blonde hair behind her ear as she loaded the stove with fresh coal and opened the damper. Suddenly, she realized that her father had disappeared. "Got to see what Pap's done." She jumped up. The rest of the family heard the front door slam behind her like a rifle crack.

Brenda ran down the trail, searching desperately for what she hoped not to find. At a point where the ground seemed to have been swept, she pulled up suddenly and her heart stuck. A crow cawed its warning as it lifted from the ground. She knelt at a stain near some disturbed leaves on the trail and rubbed the dried but sticky red dirt between fingers. She recognized the decaying, metallic smell of blood.

Racing back to the house, she howled. "Pap done killed that boy for no reason other than he done come to see me." She dropped into a chair, sure all happiness had forever vanished. "He's laying dead in some secret place in them woods." She hugged her knees beneath her and wondered how life could contain such sorrow. A hint of red lurked beneath the rust-streaks of the cast-iron stove, but Brenda felt no warmth. Brushing the damp blackness of her hair from her eyes, she asked her mother, "Why?"

Her mother looked out the window into the dreary gray of the morning as if she had not heard.

"Why?" Brenda repeated.

"Men got their sense of honor..." Her mother started to answer and then seemed to have forgotten she was speaking.

Brenda's eyes pierced into her mother.

"Women, children...we suffer."

Brenda's wail interrupted her. "My life's over."

"Suffering's never over." Her mother stared at the door with a look of terror.

## II

When Samuel didn't return from in Turner Hollow that first night, his family remembered what had been said before he went courting. "Crazy people living down there," Josiah Elweh stood beanpole tall with dirty, straight hair parted in the middle. He'd fixed watery blue eyes on Samuel, his favorite grandson. "Kill ye for looking crosswise, easy as spit on the ground." He'd released a long stream of tobacco juice over the porch rail and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Gramp, I know ye got to be careful with those Hazard folk. But this Brenda I'm fixing to visit is a true black-haired beauty," Samuel had answered.

Josiah had shrugged; he'd said all he intended to on the subject. Two years earlier when his wife died, he'd gone three days without eating and sleeping. "Better to have taken me first," he had hissed, pacing the floor until he collapsed. When he could speak again, the left corner of his mouth quivered without moving. After this, whole days passed without a word.

What he said was often odd; his stare distant as if fixed on some unavenged lapse of justice. His words tumbled out in rambling parables, ruptured by long, swollen silences. Josiah's voice developed a fearsome flatness and he became a stranger at the center of the family. They respected his position as patriarch, but were bewildered by what he said and did.

Elbert, Samuel's father, had looked uncomfortable and remained silent as Josiah Elweh spoke his forebodings. Since Josiah Elweh had changed, Elbert seemed unsure how to chart the family's course.

Samuel's brothers and sister had smirked at the thought of him smitten by a young woman he barely knew. "All worked up over her, ain't ye," teased his sister, the baby of the family.

Shaking his head so his thick black hair fell over his forehead, Aaron, the youngest of the three brothers, had glared at his sister. "Leave it alone, now," he said. But his eyes revealed his discomfort.

While listening quietly, Samuel's mother had kept her eyes focused on the ground. "Stick with yer own," she'd whispered.

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By morning, the family's fear had hardened to despair. They waited with resignation for word of Samuel. Shortly before noon, the Fugates heard from the mailman, who'd obtained information from a woman with a sister living at the mouth of Turner Hollow. Samuel had gone down the creek to Joe Turner's house and never come out that evening.

"What we ought to do?" Elbert asked his father.

"Best go straight down there," replied Josiah Elweh.

The men of the family hitched horses and drove their wagon over old dirt mining roads winding through the hills to the entrance of Turner Hollow. Nobody talked much. Elbert sat alone up front and drove the team of horses. Behind him, Josiah sat in a chair facing the direction from which they'd come. He braced himself with the butt of his old double-barrel shotgun.

Josiah rode in silence, recalling better days when he was a young man barnstorming the hollows and towns of eastern Kentucky on foot, preaching the word of God. He'd taken up his mission when he was twenty-five, fortified by the love of his eighteen-year old bride. "Can't promise you love, nor happiness," he preached to his converts, writhing in ecstasy and fear under the whip of his words. "Eternal justice, that's what shall be yers," he shouted and his congregation answered in tongues.

Aaron and Raymond, Samuel's younger brothers, hunkered in the bed of the wagon. Leaning against the driver's bench, they gripped their hunting rifles.

It was near dark when the Fugates reached Turner Hollow. The men conferred until Josiah Elweh announced it was best to wait until morning to confront Turner. Elbert walked with the boys into the hollow to investigate.

Josiah Elweh remained alone, seated in the wagon like a stone idol

while they searched. “I known suffering. Two of my babies turn blue before dying on me.” He spoke bitterness to the breeze rising before nightfall. “When the coal cart crushed half my thumb and index finger, the bosses turned me out like I was dirt somehow stuck to their boots.” He choked under the injustice. “All my life, lived poor, but worked hard.”

As he stared into some middle distance, the image of his beloved wife wavered before him. “Done right by God and man. Expected the same in return.” He spat these words along with a mouthful of tired chaw into the dirt beside the wagon.

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As they penetrated deeper into the hollow, Elbert and his two boys sniffed the air and studied the forest about them. They noted leaves scattered cross the path in an unnatural manner. Mixed with the forest’s cloying smell of fertility and rot, they detected the harsh odor of dried blood. A forlorn croak startled them and they looked up at a congregation of crows circling over some twisted undergrowth surrounded by sparse maple trees. They pushed through the brush under this malignant flock and discovered a place where dirt was loose. Digging with hands and sticks, they uncovered Samuel. He was stiff and you could recognize only part of his face.

Elbert moaned.

“Going to kill that bastard sure now,” Raymond said.

Aaron waved off black flies rising from their feast. His knees buckled and he felt suffocated. Life’s falling apart, he thought.

After nightfall, Elbert and the boys returned and placed Samuel in the wagon. Josiah Elweh lurched back to awareness. He faced upward and moaned. “Now, Ye done took my dear boy from me.” He lowered his head and stared straight ahead. “He who pollutes the land, shall harvest the whirlwind. And the third angel poured out his vial upon the rivers and fountains of water and they became blood.”

The Fugate men huddled together under the wagon to wait for morning. Aaron remembered how Samuel had confided in him. “To find a good woman ain’t simple as pulling apples off a tree. Fugates related one way or another to most families living in Carver.”

Aaron had understood the pressure on Samuel to find a wife from their own rolling hills, but he’d wished his older brother had been able to see further. “You’ve worked in Cincinnati, Chicago and Dayton. There’re plenty more women in this wide world than only this little patch of Kentucky.” As if in a fever, Aaron dreamed of Samuel smiling at him from a distance before he disappeared suddenly into a furious flash of lightning.

At first light, Josiah Elweh led Elbert and his two grandsons single file up little Tawasset Crick to its east branch, and then on to the Turner home. As they marched, Aaron’s thinking wavered between the grimness

of the present and thought of the future. He didn't want to become like his father, living his whole life in the county where he'd been born.

Elbert had only left Kentucky once. "When the Japs bombed that place in the Pacific, I joined up." He loved to tell stories about his adventures. "Put us on a train out of Lexington bound for New York." He scanned the faces of his sons to be sure of their attention. "I prowled round the streets of that city like a cougar at the end of winter. I ain't lying." He grinned with satisfaction at the coming punch line. "Got to staring up at all them tall buildings so bad I got sunburnt on the roof of my mouth." Aaron knew this story, its words and cadences, from frequent retelling.

As they walked, shadows lurked in the slanting light of morning. The low moan of wind ruffled half-naked trees. Autumn leaves spiraled to the earth to start their slow decay. Aaron felt the obligations of the code by which his people lived slowly squeezing the youth from him. He wanted to be out in the world, not trapped in this small corner of southeastern Kentucky. Dreaming of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, he imagined Hank Williams crooning "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry," a song he often heard on radio WSFA. Aaron felt like the whip-poor-will of that song—"too blue to fly." But if he wanted to escape Carver, where who he was and what he did were preordained, he knew he must learn to fly.

At nineteen, Aaron was a year younger than Raymond, but he had light in his eyes where Raymond had only dull acceptance. Although he understood the conventions of their life, he feared where retribution might lead and where it ended.

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The trees thinned as they approached the house. The air was still and there was no noise from inside. "We come for ye, Joe Turner," Elbert shouted as they entered the yard. Raymond, Aaron, and Josiah Elweh fanned out in a semicircle facing the porch on either side of Elbert with their guns prepared for whatever might take place.

Mrs. Turner opened the door, looking gray from crying. As she stepped outside, Brenda, her face also streaked, fell in silently beside her. "Be ye the Fugates?" asked Mrs. Turner. The men nodded in grim affirmation. "Joe's up in them hills somewhere and we ain't seen him since the evening fore last."

They didn't notice Josiah Elweh lurch forward at the left of the line, his eyes ablaze from some internal source. He tightened his grip and pulled the first trigger on his double barrel. The blast spun Mrs. Turner half-way around and she toppled to the porch. Frozen in astonished horror, the others stared as Josiah Elweh scrambled onto the porch like a huge and malevolent spider. He fired his next shot into Brenda, who had stepped in front of her mother's body, trapped between her fury and her fear.

"What ye doing, Pap?" Elbert yelled at his father.

Josiah Elweh roared, "Blood debts must be paid."



“But they’s womenfolk,” Aaron screamed in disbelief.

“They lived with the devil and known what he done and could do.” Spittle clung to Josiah Elweh’s face as he stormed.

Rapidly, Josiah Elweh stepped over the lifeless bodies and entered the house. The bolt snapped shut behind him. “Boys, stop gramp before anyone else gets kilt,” Elbert barked while they ran toward the house. As they crashed against the door, the brace held strong. From inside, they heard the shotgun reload. One discharge cut short a high-pitched wail; another pierced a cry of terror. Spent shells hit the floor followed by another blast. When they finally broke down the door, Elbert and his sons saw blood weeping from three small corpses.

Sweeping the kerosene lantern off the table, Josiah Elweh stumbled outside, face convulsing. He rounded on Elbert. “Don’t be gawking; I did what you oughter done yerself.” Fluid from the shattered lamp spread rapidly over the floor. Josiah Elweh commanded, “Out, now.” As Elbert and the boys cascaded out the door, he struck a wooden match and flicked it behind them. The room burst into flames.

Elbert, Raymond and Aaron stared into the consuming fire while Josiah looked on with dour satisfaction. “Our work here’s done,” he said. “Joe Turner can live with what he’s wrought, or come looking to me for satisfaction.” He spat. “Don’t make me no difference.” His stained teeth contorted in a bleak grin.

Elbert started out of the hollow. Raymond followed. Aaron trailed. The chill of what they’d witnessed engulfed them. They walked as if carrying a heavy load.

Shunned by the rest of the family, Josiah Elweh hung back, looking smaller and slumped as his rage slowly dissipated. He tilted his head upward. “Have not Ye ordained that the iniquity of the fathers shall be visited on the children?” When no sign manifested, he lowered his eyes and slowly surveyed the carnage around him. Recognition flickered momentarily in his confused mind. He started to mouth a benediction for the burning house and the corpses within. As the walls collapsed, his eyes twitched and this small tremor of doubt vanished. He turned to start out of the hollow behind the others.

Before he descended to the river, Josiah turned back as if in response to a call. Through the smoke and flames in the distance, he thought he saw a man. He imagined Turner choking on the cinders of his family and home. As he disappeared into the trees, Josiah sought confirmation. “Has not the full mete of justice now been paid, Lord?” He scowled when the silence from above remained unbroken. Moving briskly, he hurried to catch the rest of the family.

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As he walked out of the hollow, Aaron remembered how his grandfather had taught him to skin squirrels, wrestling their pelts off with

one long pull. The man in blood frenzy back at Turner's was not the stern but fair gramp of his memory. What happened here ain't right and never can be made right, Aaron thought. He looked with revulsion at the blood on his shirt from the five bodies they'd left behind.

Aaron knew he must escape the harshness of the life which surrounded him. By the time he reached the head of the hollow, he had surged to the front. "I pray never to see this place again," he muttered, "nor remember none of what happened here today." In a half-run, he crossed the bridge and by-passed the wagon holding Samuel's body. Without looking back, he raced toward the highway to hitch a ride south into Tennessee. A groan of loss ripped from deep within him. He knew he would never see his family again.

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When he reached the wagon, Elbert spoke in a flat tone. "Now Aaron done left us." His voice broke.

Josiah, who had just come up, said: "It's God's will."

With hollow eyes, Elbert stared at his father. Slowly climbing onto the driver's bench, he was silent as Josiah hoisted himself up to sit beside him. As they travelled, the heat of the Indian summer afternoon shimmered off the dirt in the distance. Sweat pooled, dripping off Elbert's face and back. Without looking at his father, Elbert finally spoke to the space between the horses. "Why kill the women and children?"

Josiah Elweh snorted and did not respond at first. Finally he broke his silence. "Turner's to blame; he abandoned his family to pay his blood debt."

Elbert did not acknowledge this answer. He looked at the road ahead as if it disappeared into endless darkness. They rode from that point without talking.

When they reached home, Elbert lurched past his wife and daughter, who stood like silent sentinels at the door. As nobody told him what to do, Raymond remained on the wagon guarding his brother's body. Anguished screams broke like waves against the walls of the house and then subsided to muffled weeping.

Josiah Elweh staggered into the yard to seek answers from the mystery of the darkening sky. The fury of the day had purged him like a devouring tongue of fire. He stood without motion, listening to the faint echo of his pulse. Certainties ebbed with the slowing of his internal tide. Total isolation descended on him like a shroud.

# Joan Ryan

## For Ornamental Purposes Only

Plant this tree in full eastern light, away from streets or property lines where the bright pomaceous fruit may tempt passersby or curious neighbors, as its seeds contain minute amounts of cyanide, and the fruit is reported to cause reactions ranging from fatigue and mild confusion to paranoia and auditory delusion, terminating occasionally in cessation of respiratory and cardiac function. Enjoy its masses of flowers in season, but do not inhale too deeply, as the rosaceous scent of the blossoms is known to bring rushes of blood to facial and genital capillaries, causing arrhythmia in susceptible persons. This product is not intended to treat, cure or prevent mental, physical or emotional deficiencies, and its Maker cannot be held responsible for inappropriate or off-label uses.

# Jessie Li

## First Love

Then it was over: my stiff heart  
bent, the wind upstairs  
groaning like lovers' beds, and  
overhead your voice stumbling,  
unfigured as we fell,  
wooden clunk, bodies  
unbunked, and those  
porcelain plates chattering,  
their glass cases trembling.

# Richard T. Rauch

## Memory at the Edge of Rain

I left you at calculable infinity  
counting to ten,  
feeling for faux boundaries  
over and over again,  
toes wriggling to find an edge,  
your dark eyes exploding  
in a flood of pupils.

Too dark to see anyway,  
it could have been up,  
but that old emptiness  
rising in our gut told us  
we were heading down.

Gravity left our minds floating  
a step or two behind, hands  
held out as if by some instinct,  
reaching in different directions,  
right past each other

until my arms remembered  
the way you'd liquefy  
like rain accumulating  
in hopes of open seas.

# Joan Ryan

## Mae West Hitches a Ride on Google Earth

Just tonight,  
let me join your journey,  
ride the beam of your eye,  
through the liquid  
crystal screen,  
from the edges of the map  
to your street, our house, this room,  
swim through  
the question of your ear,  
and river-blue veins,  
to the viral center of your cells.

Show me how  
waves form waves  
and seashells, fractal. Then lift me  
far above—into the sky—  
higher—past red moons  
through the cloud nebulae into the future  
or the void.

Tell me all. Then hear me ask for more.  
I am the fisherman's wife who would be  
God, young and old,  
the ever greedy  
girl.

*com'ere, big boy  
I'm a woman of very few words  
but lots of action  
loosen up*

*cultivate your curves  
it ain't no sin*

*I'll try anything once  
twice if I like it and  
he who hesitates is a damn fool*

*virtue has its own reward  
but no sales at the box office,  
aincha never heard of it?*

*five will get you ten  
if you know how to work it, and  
a hard man is good to find*

*maybe I ain't got no soul and  
goodness has nothing to do with it, but  
good girls go to heaven  
bad girls go everywhere—  
see ya later*

# Lesley Clinton

## Latent Strain Waking

All gleam and teeth, the Milky Way slices the darkness.  
The final man and woman have come to the desert floor to  
hear their ancestors throw importunate echoes, to figure this  
problem of progeny. The distance looks on these two with  
the cloudy alarm of a newborn. Bleached bones like runes  
glow silver under cool night, riddle at some hidden ingress.

His jaw a taught bowstring, her eyes sharp-chiseled flint  
gleaming with the slick blood of ambition, she turns to him.  
Survival on his breath, he exhales into her hair, a gesture  
wholly human—the last of such, of saying, wanting to say.  
Their veins teem with a drive to build, to knead the sand  
into civilizations even as it caves away from under them—

for something always lasts, wears marked change. Deep in  
the wayfaring canyon, all ache and urgency, they plot transit  
between potentials. They've read their fate—blood, decay,  
re-formation—but still chart the abyss undaunted. They are  
a spark, spit to meet tinder. The rash of suns, ravenous in  
its spread, won't blot them out, only await their bright reply.

# Adele Wegner

## Spectral

Gears of snowflakes interlock across the dark, like gypsum gathering on parked cars. Nest of wires, your mind tracing the moon's modulations (like that, but bluer; like that, but the blue's orbit...). Suitcase packed with shed skin and raiment, glitches in time and memory; a former self calls and I hang up. Sidewalk blotted by dark spots you walk into and disappear an hour; arriving again on the other side of the city. Our shadows, statues on the station wall colored a dulled gold. You said,

*how to make the falling part*

*be beautiful; contusion*

lit by the moon's spectral residues...



# Greg Jenkins

## Komatsu

As much as he hated anything, Goldman hated soggy cereal. Yet he began every morning by confronting another bowl of it. Corn flakes. Problem was, at seventy-seven, almost seventy-eight years old, he ate slowly, grudgingly as it were. The benefits of eating no longer seemed to justify the sheer effort the process cost him. Hence his cereal dependably got soggy.

After a while, he shifted his brooding eyes from the limp corn flakes to the cracked and peeling, pink-and-green flowered wallpaper in front of him. No great pleasure to be had there, either.

This morning, like most mornings, he'd had a tough time urging himself out of bed. Same issue as the cereal—where was the payoff? Actually, he'd been lost in a rather blissful dream, one he'd had before. The setting was a younger and sprightlier era; Goldman was in his prime, and everyone else was in fine fettle as well. Family, friends. He couldn't remember what exactly they'd been doing in the dream, maybe just hanging out, but they all seemed happy and vital. Not like now. Maybe it was Thanksgiving or Christmas, for he seemed to recall rich flavorful food—no sodden corn flakes—and a choreographed parade or a wholesome movie on TV.

Not unexpectedly, it was his son Gary who'd finally gotten him moving. Flat on his back in the rumpled bed, hands folded on his middle as if practicing for burial, Goldman grumbled with irritation as he felt his son's bluff, hortatory grip on his bony shoulders, his wasted biceps.

"OK, Pop, let's go!" Gary had sung, giving his father a vigorous shake.

"Let an old man sleep," Goldman whined.

"Nothing doing. Sinatra said you can sleep when you're dead. And you ain't dead yet."

"No, not yet," Goldman conceded.

"So rise and shine."

Rising to one elbow but not shining, Goldman once again had a long, thoughtful and nettled look at this middle-aged fellow who was his only son. Gary appeared at this moment as he typically did—like a cleaner, less shopworn version of Goldman himself (though the cheery, positive expression was certainly the younger man's own). His brown eyes were wide open and very earnest, as if trying to sell you something you weren't sure you wanted or needed, and the mustached mouth was open too, always ready with the next zesty bit of encouragement. As usual, the lanky and unremarkable body was clad in the same pale blue denim that prisoners wear, shirt and jeans both.

But where was the beer? Though never visibly drunk, Gary unfailingly

had a beer close at hand, if not in hand, morning, noon and night. Even as Goldman silently formed the question, his son leaned over and plucked up a can of Miller from a nightstand, had a short sip.

A coffee drinker himself, Goldman disapproved of alcohol, especially at this timid hour of the day. Still, he loved his son, appreciated his company, and tended to overlook his few flaws. One of Gary's biggest flaws was no doubt the fact that he was dead, having been killed in a car accident two years ago.

Fortunately, from what Goldman could tell, death hadn't diminished his son much or even hurt him especially. He still looked as solid and corporeal as anybody else, expressed himself clearly and intelligently, and had a lucid understanding of the world in which he no longer lived. In fact, the two men spent more time together now, and better quality time, than they ever had when Gary had been living. Goldman acknowledged that perhaps there was some irony in this sad fact.

He also acknowledged, not without guilt, that his son's ghostly presence was preferable to that of his wife Gladys, who was likewise deceased. A decade ago, she had fallen victim to a slow-moving disease that killed several individual parts of her before killing the whole person. "Oh Rusty," she'd cried out in her throes, "I feel as if something's tearing me down, ripping me apart." "No, no," Goldman lied to her, "you're gonna come through this OK. You're gonna be fine." In a way, she *had* survived, just as his son had. But unlike his son, Gladys these days was more of a faint, penumbral presence that lingered along the fuzzy edges of Goldman's awareness. She came to him mostly as a spectral package of nagging regrets—of things he'd done and things he hadn't done. When she spoke, she was rarely as agreeable as Gary.

At length, Goldman removed his eyes from the awful wallpaper and put them back on the bowl of cereal that sat beneath him like a small stagnant pond.

"I hate soggy cereal," he said.

His son came closer. "If you ate faster, Pop," he said gently, "it wouldn't get soggy."

"I can't eat faster. I'm not hungry."

"What you gotta do," Gary said, "is dress that cereal up a smidgeon. Put some strawberries on there. Some banana. Give them ol' corn flakes some pizzazz."

"I don't like strawberries," Goldman said. "I don't like banana. I don't even like cereal."

"So make something else. You ain't helpless."

"Make something else... What am I, a chef?"

"No," Gary said, sipping his beer, "you're a cranky old man, is what you are."

Turning his grizzled head, Goldman leveled an indignant stare at his son and tried to compose a cutting retort, like maybe, *If you're so smart, how come you're dead?* But before he could shape the words, he was stopped cold

by an unearthly mechanical rumble from outside his cramped box of a home. Fairly nearby at that. The noise was deep and intimidating—and ongoing—and Goldman sprang to his feet with a spryness he would've sworn had deserted him.

He went to the window and, using some caution, pulled back the blind. It was fall, and the gloom of the night had not yet been fully dismissed. This far into the year, the darkness stayed late in the morning and returned early in the evening; too damn much darkness, Goldman thought. Nevertheless, he was able to peer through the bare, jagged branches of a white birch tree in his yard and make out, just up the street, an arresting sight.

A massive industrial machine had been positioned in the overgrown front yard of an abandoned two-story house. The machine looked something like a backhoe but was strikingly larger, wickeder, more awe-inspiring. A glass-enclosed cab where an operator would sit rested on a pair of enormous metal tracks of the type Goldman had seen on army tanks. Extending from a sturdy joint next to the cab was a stupendous metal boom, which connected to an equally imposing metal arm, which terminated eventually in a toothy-edged metal bucket big enough to scoop up a family of four. Stationary for now, the machine, mostly a dirty yellow it seemed in the dimness, throbbed with the harsh rhythm of a barely contained destructive power.

Not far from this yellow monster, three men in white hardhats stood talking, as if planning what exactly was about to happen.

Goldman could guess well enough what was in the works, though the concept made him uneasy.

"That's Dolly Lissome's place," he said.

"Used to be," Gary corrected him. "She ain't been there in what? Ten, twelve years?"

"Has it been that long?" Goldman touched a fingertip to his white-stubbled chin, trying to calculate.

"At least," Gary said. He stood at the other side of the window, had a peek out himself at the ramshackle wooden house. "Real eyesore, huh, Pop?"

"Oh, I wouldn't, I don't... Say, you don't suppose they're gonna..."

"Tear it down?" A comfortable sip of beer. "Sure they are. That's why they brought that big ugly gizmo."

The unassailable logic of this statement made Goldman's heart ache, and he pulled away from the window, caught his son's eye. "But that house has been part of the neighborhood since day one."

"Sure has," Gary said. "And that's why they're gonna tear 'er down. Real eyesore, Pop."

Like everyone else, Goldman had heard the rumors, heard them for years, but rumors were one thing. The possibility that someone might at last take real and decisive action against a friendly old house that had done nothing to harm anyone else unsettled him. He turned to his wife, who

was floating hazily in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room.

“Gladys,” he said, “what do you think they’re gonna do out there?”

She didn’t answer him immediately, and when she did, her voice was testy. “I wouldn’t have any idea,” she said.

Nodding at the predictable flatness of her reply, Goldman had another glum glance at his cereal and circled away from it. He poured some steaming coffee into a thermos and, from the back of a chair, grabbed a midnight blue windbreaker his son had given him and pulled it on. The jacket had little yellow half-moons and silver stars on it and made Goldman look like a warlock or a wizard, which he certainly wasn’t, but he liked it regardless.

When he arrived at the site, he stood on the sidewalk next to the condemned property and watched quietly. The three hardhatted men were clustered between the house and the dreadful machine, still talking and gesturing among themselves. One of them carried a clipboard, and, since this one was doing most of the talking and gesturing, Goldman guessed that maybe he was the boss.

Above them all loomed the machine, which, in the strengthening light of this fall day, resembled a giant insect, or perhaps some giant predatory dinosaur. Motionless, it continued to rumble, the great diesel engine warming deliberately for whatever exertion awaited it. Halfway up the towering boom, Goldman noticed, was the word KOMATSU, all in black, block letters. The word felt utterly alien to him, as if it came not just from another culture but from another cosmos, another plane of existence, and it aroused a chill at the very tip of his spine. The word seemed like a secret code, he thought. Like a dark incantation. “Komatsu,” Goldman murmured to himself, and he tried feebly to imagine the godlike physical leverage that lurked within the deep-voiced machine.

Naturally, his son had joined him, and Goldman spoke to him now. “I can’t believe they’re gonna do this,” he said.

“Oh, they’re gonna do it all right,” Gary said, with a hint of juvenile excitement.

His emotions swirling, Goldman recalled the woman who used to live in the house. Dolly Lissome. Helluva good looker in her day, with long-lashed lapis eyes, a cascade of brassy hair and a chest that fairly shouted of superb health and immodest sexual energy. It was shallow of him, as even he would’ve admitted, but a gaudy bosom never failed to capture his masculine attention. Truth was, he and Dolly had always felt a certain attraction to each other, and when her husband Mike passed away—heart attack dropped him like a shot from a .30-06—Goldman took it upon himself to offer Dolly some moral support. Much of that support was conveyed in the very house at which he now anxiously stared. And several times that support had, for better or worse, accelerated into something more deliriously hormonal—but they were human beings, after all. In the

history of the world, such things had been known to happen.

Even so, he was glad, truly glad, that his wife had never found out about it.

He was pretty sure she hadn't.

"Immoral support," he muttered to himself.

He looked around for his wife and spotted her floating at an angle beside a glossy green holly shrub. "Gladys," he said, "c'mon over here."

She folded her arms in front of her. "I'm fine where I am," she said.

As Goldman nodded, one of the workers, a tall lean man with narrowed eyes, broke away from his colleagues and strode right over to the rumbling machine, climbed up into the cab. Instantly the noise changed in character, becoming louder, more aggressive. With no hesitation the man manipulated some levers and abruptly the tracks, the whole apparatus, lurched into forward motion. Despite its ponderous size, the thing rolled ahead so swiftly and nimbly across the yard that, for a moment, it stole away what little was left of Goldman's breath. In just a few seconds the distance between the Komatsu and the house shrank to almost nothing.

And then it *was* nothing.

Smoothly but very powerfully, the metal arm, led by the fist-like metal bucket, swung in an arc with the same action a brawler would use to deliver a roundhouse right. The roar that erupted when the bucket slammed into the house turned Goldman's knees to jello. He felt himself wobble as a sizeable portion of the second floor caved in raggedly, exposing a bathroom—my God, there was a sink, a tub. Bits of wood, glass and other debris flew into the air like confetti and then clattered to the earth a few eye-blinks later. Backing up, Goldman almost toppled off the sidewalk. Gradually the bucket withdrew as the man in the machine assessed the damage.

"Jesus," Gary whispered at Goldman's side. He seemed almost as impressed as his father.

A handful of ragtag spectators had by now assembled on the sidewalk, and a series of exclamations passed among them. Goldman was about to offer a stunned comment of his own when the heavy bucket—so like a fist!—walloped the house a second time. More debris hurtled into the air, and once again Goldman and the others reacted with a mixture of fascination and horror. This time, when the bucket pulled back, they noted solemnly that the bathroom had largely ceased to exist. The tub had gone sailing not too gracefully into the yard, and the sink had apparently been jolted into another room. Most everything else in that part of the house was missing and unaccounted for.

Again and again the frightful machine attacked the house, and each time less and less of the structure remained. Very quickly Goldman came to understand that he was observing a process whose end result was foreordained and inevitable. He was watching a kind of tragedy, but, like all tragedies, he supposed, it had to be played out. Watch and learn, he told himself. Or watch and don't learn; learning was hard, especially at

his age. As minutes swelled into hours, the succession of crushing blows lost some, though not all, of their ability to shock the onlookers, a number of whom slowly trickled away. But the shocks to the house remained steady and telling. The man in the machine had a crafty strategy, and he was tearing the house down, ripping it apart, as if it were made of mere popsicle sticks.

When most of the house had been reduced to rubble, it occurred to Goldman that he'd been standing for longer than he'd stood in years. His feet, knees and hips ached, and in that order. It also occurred to him that it'd been a while since he'd eaten anything substantial—like since yesterday. In spite of the day's briskness, he hadn't even touched the hot coffee in his thermos. So, with his dead son and his dead wife in tow, he returned home.

In his kitchen he made himself an olive loaf sandwich—plenty of mayo, the way he liked it—had one or two bites, then set it aside. Preoccupied, he wandered over to the window.

"Hey, Pop?" Gary said with a note of concern. "Is that all you're gonna eat?"

"I'm OK," Goldman said, waving his hand. "You want the rest of that sandwich, sport, you can have it." He'd no sooner spoken the words than he suspected perhaps he'd said something irreverent or inappropriate; he doubted that Gary ate anymore, even though he did drink beer. "It's up to you," he put in, hoping to cover up any faux pas.

Peering out the window, Goldman saw that the machine was still active, its movements crisp and purposeful. Well, it was pursuing an agenda, he thought. Probably he could've used more of an agenda himself.

But the view out there appalled him. Terrible as the huge yellow Komatsu was to look on, the devastated landscape was worse. Where once there stood a familiar house, now there was nothing...an unaccustomed view to another house, stone gray, farther up the street. Goldman didn't want to see the new house; he wanted to see the old one that he'd known for years. But a hole had been torn open in the neighborhood—in his reality. Still standing at the window, he resisted the urge to shudder.

He turned to face his son, who'd sat down at the table and seemed to be considering the sandwich. "Gary," he said, "you used to do that kinda work, didn't you?"

"What kind?"

"Machines. Big machines."

"I ran a crane, Pop. You remember."

"That's right, a crane. You used to build things *up*. You didn't tear 'em down."

Gary pushed his chair away from the table, crossed his legs and folded his hands behind his head. He looked contemplative. "Building up," he mused, "tearing down...it's all good if it's part of the plan, you know?"

"Part of the plan."

“Sure. Gotta clear away the old, Pop, to make room for the new. Right?”

Goldman coughed up a noncommittal grunt; it was the best he could do. Not for the first time, he wondered if his son’s death had been part of some overarching plan.

He recollected that fateful day, two years ago. It was evening, and Gary had been off at a meeting of the local Astronomy Club. Studying the heavens was a hobby of his that Goldman could never quite get his mind around. What was the point? If something was happening in the sky, what could you do about it? In any case, the accident struck when Gary was driving home. A light skiff of snow had whitened and slickened the roads, and he lost control of his pickup, spinning it into a concrete pillar. As usual, he’d had some alcohol in his system, but, as usual, he’d been under the limit; the autopsy report confirmed it. So the precise cause of the crash remained somewhat unclear. Was it the snow? The minimal dose of alcohol? Poor judgment? Something in the stars? The report didn’t say, and Goldman was unable to reach a comfortable conclusion.

Since then, at night, he would occasionally glance up furtively at the sprinkled sky. But he saw only a nameless, shapeless scatter of lights. No design, no pattern. Nothing he could interpret.

Now, for an instant, he was tempted to ask his son directly: *Gary, just what in the hell happened that night? For God’s sake, tell me. Why did you have to die?* But perhaps his son didn’t know either. Or perhaps he did know but didn’t want to talk about it.

Goldman shook his blanched head and once again pulled on the dark blue astral windbreaker, zipped it up and pushed his hands down deep into its pockets. He located his wife hovering like a mist over near the stove.

“Gladys,” he said, “what do you think of that machine out there tearing down that house?”

A moment passed. “Rusty, I wouldn’t have any idea,” she said. “No idea.”

Goldman had always prided himself on being one of the rare folks who declined to ogle at sights that were sick, perverse or horrific. People who were deformed, let’s say. Acts of terrorism caught on videotape. Spectacular car accidents (particularly during the last two years). God knew there were better uses for a man’s eyes. But this noble side of him was strangely absent today as he shuffled back to the scene of the continuing demolition. The work distressed him, yet he felt compelled to see more of it. It was as if he were being drawn there against his will—as if the gigantic Komatsu were, among other things, a kind of devilish magnet.

This time when he left he took with him a folding lawn chair and the morning’s newspaper. He fancied that when he sat in the canvas chair he looked like a film director, but of course he didn’t. As to the newspaper, he doubted he’d read much, though he did have a regular habit of perusing the obituaries. He did so not out of morbidness but more in the spirit of

simple curiosity. He liked to read the little profiles of those who'd died to see if he knew them and see what if anything they'd accomplished. Often they hadn't done much. In this regard, however, he criticized no one, for he understood that life could be, and generally was, a rough and merciless opponent.

Come to think of it, when Goldman finally packed it in, what would the paper say about him? Could be any day now. Well, a high school graduate, he guessed, an army veteran, the one-time owner of a tiny shoe store (where he frequently joked that he was operating on a shoestring)... a husband, a father. Ah, my. Where was the writer who could bring some shimmer to facts as pedestrian as those?

When he arrived at his spot on the sidewalk, Goldman unfolded his chair and cautiously lowered himself into it. As before, other gawkers were on hand, though none of them had a chair. No sooner had he settled in than his son began elbowing Goldman's shoulder.

"Hey, Pop," Gary said, "look what they're doing now."

At this point the house had been utterly flattened—no smart bomb could've done a more thorough job—and the hulking yellow machine had taken on a new role. Under the skilled direction of the man inside, it was scooping up bucketfuls of the debris that lay heaped everywhere, whirling magically on its axis even as the metal tracks stayed fixed in place, and pouring the shattered remains of what used to be a house into a squat gray dump truck. And the process would repeat—hundreds of pounds of flotsam captured with each hungry scoop. With the first truck steadily filling up, a second truck now chugged in behind its partner, awaiting its cue.

Instinctively Goldman kept most of his attention on the machine, marveling at its movements. The way it rotated was uncanny. Almost scary. He also found it astonishing that an invention so mighty could exhibit, at times, such delicacy and finesse. The bucket, for instance, didn't just ram down blindly into a mound of rubble and force up whatever it could; often it pushed, probed, tilted and retitled—and even retreated—depending on the need. The lifting itself was executed with balance, control and coordination. Apart from the absurd difference in scale, the technique he was observing now wasn't too far removed from his own when, so long ago, he was a boy digging in the sand at the beach.

But then the machine would raise a triumphant fistful of debris high in the air and pulverize it, let it fall to the earth, scoop it up again and pulverize it once more. Though Goldman could see the logic in this maneuver—the refined pieces would fit more easily into a dump truck—the sight and sound of the crunching still caused him to wince.

"Ain't that something, Pop?" Gary said, nudging with his elbow.

Goldman grunted and, remembering the newspaper he was clutching, decided to give it a gander.

"Gladys," he called to his wife, who was afloat over by the holly shrub, "care to see a piece of the paper?"



The afternoon's golden light shone through her as she shook her gray head. "No, not now, Rusty," she said. "Not now. I'm hardly in the mood for that."

Goldman nodded and shrugged.

He was disappointed to note that the obituaries today were less plentiful than usual. Maybe death, though not taking a holiday, had cut back its hours. In his usual fashion he read through the write-ups with care and concentration, evaluating honestly but sympathetically the encapsulated lives that rustled in the pages before him. He had a personal familiarity with just one of the newly dead (or those who had "transitioned," as the paper would have it, or "gone home" or "left to be with the Lord")—a banker named Alric Eisenberg.

Years ago, seeking some loan money to expand his shoe store, Goldman approached Eisenberg at the bank downtown. Though the amount he named was a pittance (it might buy a couple pounds of olive loaf in today's market), Eisenberg refused him. Said Goldman didn't have the cash flow. Goldman tried to explain that once he made his store bigger he *would* have the cash flow, but the beefy ruddy-faced loan officer was unmoved. Lending money to the likes of Goldman, he implied, would've been irresponsible if not downright stupid. This position didn't sit too well with Goldman, who developed a festering grudge against Eisenberg and hoped, more than once, that something bad would happen to him.

Now, seeing in the paper that his old nemesis was dead, Goldman felt guilty and a shade spooked. He was certain that his embittered wishes had had nothing whatever to do with the man's demise. Well, he was reasonably certain. Actually, he realized, in this world you couldn't be certain of a damn thing. He rubbed the white whiskers on his chin reflectively. Eisenberg hadn't been the only one to reject him, he recalled, and how he would've paid back the loan had he received it was a pretty fair question. Reading further, he saw that Eisenberg, like himself, had been an army veteran and that he too had lost his spouse. A surprising tenderness welled within him as he noted that the banker had fathered a son, still living, who was probably about the same age as Gary, still deceased.

Ah, my. What did it all mean? Goldman wondered. Where did it all lead?...

To bring him back to the here and now, his son gave him a little tap on the shoulder. "Hey, Pop," he said. "Listen to that. You hear that?"

"Hear what," Goldman said, sitting up. "I don't hear anything."

"That's it," Gary smiled. "You got it."

Goldman blinked, cocked his head like a sparrow. There was silence. If only for a while, the machine had been shut down.

Still, several people, some of them bona fide inhabitants of the real world, were loitering about. One of them Goldman recognized, or he thought he did. The man was standing right next to him, staring off idly at something or nothing and smoking a cigarette. Beneath his white hardhat,

which was tipped back casually away from his brow, his gray eyes were hard and narrow, and seemed about the same hue as his trim gray hair. Completely without expression, neither friendly nor unfriendly, his face was lean and taut, much like the rest of him. He was neither young nor old, but had a kind of timeless quality about him, the way well-composed paintings or photographs do. Much taller than Goldman, he was wearing a gray work shirt and a pair of jeans so faded that the blue seemed mostly a memory. On his shirt's breast pocket a black-lettered patch identified him as Mort.

Fighting the achiness in his lower limbs, Goldman stood up. "I know you," he said, facing the man. "You're the guy that drives that thing." He gestured at the machine.

"I'm the operator," Mort said. "That's right."

"The operator, OK. So what do you call that contraption, huh?" Another gesture—a loose, over-the-top circle with the left hand.

"That's an excavator." Mort blew some smoke in a long gray plume. "Sometimes it's called a track-hoe, or a digger."

"One helluva machine, whatever you call it." Goldman turned and stared up at it; the excavator seemed to stare back. He saw the black lettering on the boom. "Made by Komatsu," he said.

"That's right. I won't use nothing else." Mort flicked a coil of ashes from the tip of his cigarette. "Don't gimme no John Deere. Don't gimme no Caterpillar."

Goldman thought: deer, caterpillar. Those are nice names. Gentle names.

"I been watching you," Goldman said. "Man, you really know what you're doing."

The expression on Mort's face, which was no expression at all, didn't change. "You do something regular enough," he said, "you get to be pretty good at it." He took another drag from his cigarette. "I been doing this forever."

"That so?"

"People want something torn down, I'm the guy they call."

Goldman looked at the man, whose face was indistinct behind a puff of smoke. "The way you handle that bucket, you could probably light somebody's cigarette with it."

"I dunno about that." Mort held up his own cigarette and eyed it for a moment. "Cigarettes," he said. "Cancer sticks, is what they are." He tossed his to the sidewalk, squashed it beneath his foot. "One of these days they're gonna kill me."

"You oughta quit," Goldman ventured.

"Sure I oughta quit. Hell, I oughta do a lotta things."

Goldman coughed into his hand. He saw that his son was standing next to him, sipping his beer, listening attentively. Gary seldom spoke when others were around; in Goldman's view, this was probably fortunate.

"You ever think," Goldman asked Mort, "about the places you tear

down?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you know. A lotta memories associated with a house, a lotta feelings.”

Mort shook his head. “It’s a job. Money in my wallet, food in my fridge.”

Edging closer, Goldman moved his hands a bit. “This house you wiped out today,” he said. “Somebody used to live there. Dolly Lissome.”

“Not no more she don’t.”

“No, not anymore,” Goldman admitted. “But I knew Dolly. Fine lady. Had a husband named Mike, died of a heart attack. Had a daughter, too, went off to school in Connecticut—”

Goldman broke off when he noticed that Mort’s face, which had been blank till now, had suddenly assumed a definite expression—one of wry amusement. The effect was startling.

“Hey, last year,” Mort said, “we almost took out the wrong house, you know? Over on the west side. Sometimes I do think about that one.” He began to chuckle, his teeth dull, the sound he made dry and oddly mirthless. “Woulda been hell to pay on that one. I mean, we got insurance and all, but still. Imagine coming home from work and finding your goddam house is gone.” He chuckled some more.

Goldman’s mouth hung open in amazement. “Almost took out the wrong house!” he said. He wanted to ask a dozen questions, but seeing that Mort’s face had now reverted to its usual stone emptiness, he decided to employ some discretion and not ask any.

No doubt sensing that Mort would soon be returning to his duties, Gary placed his hand on his father’s shoulder, whispered in his ear. “Ask him what’s next, Pop. They almost finished here or what?”

Goldman thrust his hands down into the pockets of his celestial windbreaker. “So, uh, Mort,” he said, “you all done here after today?”

“Not quite.” Mort cracked his knuckles. “Tomorrow we’re gonna use them trucks”—he indicated the remaining gray dump truck, the other having carried its load away—“bring in some topsoil, spread it around and plant some grass. Tall fescue, they call it.”

“Uh huh.”

“Next spring it’ll grow up nice and green and pretty like a carpet. You won’t be able to tell that scruffy ol’ house was ever there.”

Giving the ravaged scene a once-over, Goldman could barely tell now.

“C’mon back tomorrow and watch,” Mort said, “when we drop that topsoil and then I pat it down. I’m gonna pat it down just as soft as you pat a baby’s backside.”

Without another word, the tall rangy operator climbed up inside the machine and again brought the diesel engine roaring to life. The excavator’s stout metal frame quivered with raw power, and soon the bucket began to move.

Sighing, Goldman sat down in his chair. Even though his watch told him it wasn't that late, the sun, cool and yellow and remote, was already sagging in the sky. Darkness was coming on—always the darkness; it was a lousy time of the year, Goldman thought. Later that evening, he would peer up at the black sky, at the cold sprinkle of stars, and try to make sense of what he saw. Somehow he doubted any revelations would come to him. But then later still, he would crawl into bed, and if luck was with him, he'd have a pleasant dream or two about years gone by. Dreams weren't much, but they were better than nothing.

“So what do you think, Pop?” Gary prodded his arm. “Tomorrow we'll come back and watch 'em put down that topsoil and plant the grass, huh?”

“Oh, I dunno,” Goldman said.

“Sure you do. It'll be something nice, something positive.”

Though he didn't say so, Goldman figured the grass would make the site look like a burial ground.

He saw his wife wafting by him like a wisp of fog, closer than she'd been in some time. As he often did, he felt an impulse to say something to her, to draw her closer still if possible. But then the urge passed, and he saw no profit in trying to recall it. A man could do so much, he thought.

“So how about it, Pop?” Gary said. “We'll come here tomorrow, what the hey. It'll give us something to do, a reason to get outta bed.” He sipped his beer.

A dark shadow crossed Goldman's face as the titanic boom swung in front of him. He watched as the metal bucket thudded down hard into the debris and scooped up a load. High up into the air it went where the machine smashed it into bits and then dropped the fractured bits to the earth. The sound of the compaction made his skin crawl. As he gazed up at the dirty yellow boom, the word KOMATSU vibrated down at him.

“Pop?”

“I dunno, sport,” Goldman said softly from his chair, the light waning. “We'll see. I dunno.”

# Maria Burns

## The Jerkwater Bridge

In a final attempt to off himself, Eddie refused his insulin shots. Refusing meant to avoid the nurses of the Sunshine State of Mind Nursing and Rehabilitation Center. Eddie lied and confused them about who had given him what shot where and when. The nurses didn't know what was going on, but they sensed a shift, a little poke in the bubble of routine. The new hassle exasperated them, but they sighed and made their notes and left him alone.

He had tried other ways too. While playing checkers with Mr. Peacock, he stole and swallowed a half bottle of the old man's heart medicine, which did nothing but cause him to suspect that the medicine was a placebo. He confided this suspicion to Mr. Peacock, who, while Eddie whispered and looked askance, stole his ration of sugar-free Jell-O.

He plunged a butter knife deep into his abdomen, which was as impenetrable as the skin of an elephant. He was left with a little crescent-shaped black bruise. The thing stayed around so long that when it finally disappeared, Eddie felt he had lost a birthmark.

He hanged himself with a bit of telephone cord, but because he was heavy and bound to a wheelchair, the cord snapped and he went whizzing out of his room, past the nursing station, with a length of cord about his neck and trailing behind him like a scarf in the breeze.

"Are you trying to make a phone call, dear? A nurse asked without looking up. But he rolled past too quickly to answer.

He once managed to get too much insulin, but this only put him in a coma, which was like being at a very dull party where light flickered in confetti-sized particulates and voices muffled their talk of him, over him. All those days his motionless body lay suspended in viscous, demented liquid, at once cadaver and useless rage.

But now that he'd made it three days without insulin, he felt real promise of getting the thing done. He estimated twelve more hours at the most; this guess was not based on research or evidence but on a need to knot the loose ends. It was Thursday, and his nephew sometimes visited on Thursdays. He thought he'd like to see him one last time. The nephew was not actually Eddie's relative but a foster child who had visited the nursing home with his various families throughout the years. The boy started calling him uncle and he called the boy nephew; they never used proper names because doing so might shatter the illusion of kin. He'd watched the boy go from a silent, skinny five-year old to a striking young man of seventeen who stood six-five. Eddie sometimes dreaded his nephew's visits too because it was obvious by his looks and his size that he would soon be off to wherever young people go. But that fear no longer gripped him.

Eddie's symptoms compounded. He was weak, his mouth dry. He pinched his cheeks to keep from appearing pasty. He urinated so frequently that he nearly wet himself a few times before he reached the bathroom. He ignored the thirst, the kind that constricts the throat and slow cooks the mind to fever.

To avoid the nurses, he had to either keep moving or hide. He stopped in the lobby and hid behind the fake ficus tree. The spot did not hide him—Eddie was a large, man, almost three hundred pounds without his legs—but it made him feel hidden. The lobby window overlooked a cow pasture with only a single cow in it. Her pond reflected a piceous sky. He sometimes spent whole afternoons in the lobby, thinking about maybe going outside but not wanting to come back to the stale air. He looked for her: the cow resting beneath the crooked oak. She either dozed there beneath the oak or grazed nearby with as little effort as possible, so that it seemed an invisible hand moved her around the field. This bucolic scene led many of the homes residents into death; they stood staring a long time and passed right there in the lobby, right in front of the window. The staff talked about getting shades, but nothing was done.

Eddie wheeled to his room, but the McNamara sisters blocked his doorway. They sang "Auld Lang Syne," the only song they ever sang all the way through. One sister had a sweet voice, though she was nearly ninety years old. The other sister used a walker and sounded like a crippled crow, but she closed her eyes tight and lifted her head to heaven, which added dramatic flare to the duet, though Eddie could never tell whether it was the song that made her ache with feeling or the fact of old age.

The sisters sometimes went on for hours, even after they had messed their pants, which always seemed to happen at the same time—a kind of harmony that couldn't be achieved in their songs—and the nurses pretended they didn't notice until finally Eddie shouted about the smell and the McNamara sisters finally got separated and changed and hushed.

He wheeled passed his room, resigning it to the sisters. Despite his thirst, despite that every so often blackness passed over him and tugged him into unconsciousness, he kept moving. He had passed through The Eye, he thought. He saw it as a tunnel connecting nothing to nothing.

"You're a self-made cripple, Eddie."

The voice seemed to come from deep inside his thoughts, from that well of impenetrable blackness. Droplets of sound plinked on the surface of consciousness, somewhere a fissure lengthened and widened, and his flesh unglued itself from concern.

Twelve years prior, when he was thirty-eight, his first foot went. He watched the process with detached fascination. First the flesh swelled and split. He saw his own adipose tissue like soft, yellow roe. He lost sensation, and the doctor outlined a strict dietary regimen. But he could not stop eating. He loved anything oversweet. First one foot went, then the other, a blackening vine creeping up at him through his legs, turning them the colors of dusk until they sublimated to ghosts. Strange to watch the body

disown its parts.

“Did you hear me? I said you’re a self-made cripple!”

Eddie wheeled around to see Mr. Peacock leaning over, his blue gown open to reveal the naked body beneath. Eddie was surprised and embarrassed to discover that his checkers buddy was well hung. He was on eye-level with the great, gray thing, which rested confidently against its owner’s inner thigh. Mr. Peacock caught him looking at this source of pride and wiggled his hips rapidly, trying to get it into a helicopter swing.

Eddie flinched, afraid the thing might thwack him across the face. “I heard you alright,” he said. He normally would have ignored Mr. Peacock or distracted him with a game of checkers, but now, for reasons he could not quite understand, Eddie reached up while Mr. Peacock was twirling himself and smacked the thing off its track.

“Ooh! Ahh! But I’m the prettiest girl in town!” said Mr. Peacock as he swirled his hips to a stop, letting great, grey thing come to rest gently between his legs. He closed his robe, and, by way of apology, bent down and kissed Eddie on the cheek. “I’ll take you to her room. I can watch and you can listen! I can watch and you can listen!” Mr. Peacock started to take control of the wheelchair, but Eddie jerked and bounced himself free. Mr. Peacock laughed violently, and Eddie wheeled quickly away.

He’d gotten so accustomed to the old folks, but the past few days had tried his patience. He sensed that he had lived his entire life within these walls. When Eddie entered the nursing home, he sensed his life had just started. He had no memory of a mother and only moldy recollection of a father, a moonshiner, whose business kept him busy and whose answer was to keep his son always a little drunk. Eddie carried the flavor of corn whisky on his tongue, letting rest it there like memory, dull and metallic. He was only supposed to stay until he’d been rehabilitated. He had the disability checks, but nothing else and nowhere else, and so he stayed.

He took shelter in the dining hall. For a long time he sat, sometimes tightening the leather straps around his waist and chest, sometimes loosening the straps. The only sounds came from the kitchen, from the two cooks who never spoke, but who clattered and banged out their conversation. He circled the dining hall and found on the floor a perfectly preserved red lollipop still in its wrapper. Normally this treasure would be unwrapped, chewed only enough to avoid choking and swallowed whole, but Eddie resisted. He thought of going to her. It occurred to him that he’d been waiting all day for a reason to visit, to tie things off properly. He put the red lollipop in his pocket and went to see her.

The East wing let in the least light, and Eddie once believed the lightless rooms were the misfortune of those patients assigned to the wing. After visiting several times, Eddie realized the lack of light was deliberate; the windows were crudely covered with scraps of black construction paper, as though toddlers had decorated the place. But even a small shaft of it illuminating the grayish hallway might slice the dim silence of that space; a mind would loosen and break, its black memories eviscerating the relative

peace of the entire facility. Better to keep things dark, quiet.

Eddie wheeled cautiously down the hall. He stopped to adjust the straps around his chest. He pulled them so tight that he struggled to breathe and had to arch his back to get air in his lungs. In this way he punished himself before anyone else could. Depending on who caught him in the east wing, he would either be gently scolded and wheeled away—a look of sympathy spreading across the nurse’s face, concealing mild amusement—or made to stay in his room the rest of the afternoon, listening to the McNamara sisters and, eventually, smelling them.

Before he knew it, he was at her door. He peered into the room. Rosalie lay flat, her white gown flush with the bed sheets so that, unless one searched diligently for a human face to surface from the folds and valleys of the pillow, her bed appeared empty. Eddie went to her bedside. She was strapped down, hands and feet. The skin on her forehead was dry and flaky, like the imbricate scales of a reptile.

He unwrapped the red lollipop he’d swiped from the cafeteria. That he’d resisted this treat served for him as incontrovertible proof that he really was on the way out.

“Bobby, that you coming at me?” Rosalie said, her words came slow and garbled.

“No, not Bobby,” he said quietly. She was susceptible to fits of violence, and he hoped his whisper would calm whatever nerves twitched in readiness just below her parchment skin. “I brought you something.” Eddie placed the lollipop in her hand, and he wrapped her fingers around it. He pushed his chair back to have a good look. In the dimness of the room the candy shone a bleeding red. He could almost see a small, tight bud. “There,” he said. “A rose for Rosalie.”

Her gray and useless eyes searched the room. “Bobby, that you coming at me?” Her voice was hoarse, the voice of a woman who’d spent sixty years chain-smoking her memories into vaporous ghosts.

Eddie watched with dread as her hand began to shake. He wheeled back, ready to flee the room if she cried out. But he remembered her habit, and unlatched her restraint. She immediately lifted the lollipop to her mouth and pretended to smoke. Her features relaxed. Her hands calmed and her eyes once again closed. She was as still as pond water, like the first time he sought her out.

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Eddie learned about Rosalie from the orderlies. He sat nearby while they prepared the linen. He liked listening to the staff talk; it made him feel that convalescence was the burden of others. They, in turn, did not mind him so long as he kept quiet.

An orderly said that one of the patients was pretending to be Bobby, sneaking into Rosalie’s room each night. “You know ...” the orderly said. “You know.” The others nodded, one smiled crooked and his eyes



narrowed. Eddie did not know. He wanted to ask who Bobby was and who was the patient pretending, and why would anyone do such a thing? But already his presence on the east wing was tenuous. There, it was not merely the body that crumbled, but the fortress of the mind. As one orderly said, "When I hear those horror stories over and over, I start to think they're mine." He wore earplugs and hummed constantly.

This vague idea had rested on the surface for days, a harmless little worm gnawing at the edges of thought. And then rot spread, the way it does, cautious and deliberate, defeating the tedium of days, so that by the time he found himself in front of Rosalie's door, Eddie knew just what to do and how.

She was unshackled, a bonus. She stood at her window, smoking an invisible cigarette and methodically tapping the invisible ash into an invisible tray on the windowsill. Her hair was undone. Eddie noticed streaks of black. Hair color was such a rare thing among the patients, and hers, like an animal's stripes, revealed the last remnants of youth folding in on itself.

She could not see Eddie come into her room, unbuckle himself and hoist himself up onto her bed. In a voice loud enough to demand her but quiet enough that the nurses wouldn't notice, he said, "It's me. It's Bobby."

His heart racing, he watched her stamp out the invisible cigarette on the windowsill. "Well, I knew you was coming this night," she said, and with a quickness that both frightened and amazed him, she hoisted up her gown, hobbled a quick step to the bed, and climbed up on him. Her blind eyes darted wildly about the room as she yanked his pants down. Eddie bit his lip and tried to focus on her hair, the streaks of color that might enable him to pretend he was somewhere else, anywhere else.

She was practiced, and Eddie needed only to lie perfectly still. She panted quietly, a look of terror spreading across her face. Eddie closed his eyes.

"Your legs, Bobby. Where are your legs?"

Eddie held his breathe and bit his lip.

"Your legs, Bobby?"

Eddie exhaled and said, "The war, Rosalie."

"The war!"

"Yes, the war." This, of course, was a lie. The most battle Eddie had seen was an icing-infused, bare-knuckle fight over the last cupcake at Agatha Abernathy's one-hundredth birthday party.

"Oh, Bobby. The war!" Rosalie got to work, methodically, but in such a hurry that he cried out in pain. "Bobby," she said, in a hissing whisper, "I wish they'd shot you dead in that war."

Eddie opened his eyes, shocked. Her hair was matted, her forehead moist with perspiration—something he thought impossible in old age. Even blind, she glared at him through the mist of her gray eyes.

"I wish they'd shot you right dead through the middle of that sick head." With this she groped around his neck and head and bore her finger

into his forehead until he cried out again and finished himself in a surge of pleased pain.

“That gets you done right, I guess,” she said, and climbed down, cleaning herself with her gown with a thorough, almost clinical matter-of-factness.

Eddie clamored into his pants, down from the bed, and back into his chair and wheeled out of the room as fast as he could. But he returned. Despite a solemn promise to himself each night, he returned. Each time he had to say that he was Bobby, and each time he had to explain to Rosalie again about his missing legs.

Until he was caught.

They were in the middle of it, he with his eyes closed and she cursing him as she worked. He felt Rosalie slip up and off, and he opened his eyes to see her hover above him, her hair frantic about her face, an angel of divine judgment loosened and damned.

He gasped. One of the nurses pulled Rosalie off. She was serene one moment, and the next she thrashed and growled and slobbered rabidly. Two more nurses appeared, all three grabbed flailing limbs, trying to restrain her and avoid her biting. No one seemed to pay attention to Eddie. He sat up, thought about slipping out of the room in the commotion. An orderly appeared at the door, then another. One man swooped Rosalie in his arms, binding her limbs with careful strength. She was screaming, “I know what my brother likes! You think I don’t know what my own brother likes? You leave us!”

Eddie’s half-nude body seized as another orderly approached him, eyes narrowed to slits. He wanted to cast off his body then, let loose and drift, and he realized that he might have felt that way a long time, only just now realizing it. The orderly was over him now. He threw Eddie’s pants at him. Eddie could not look at the man, and while he was struggling to pull up his pants, the orderly yanked him from the bed and threw him in his chair. He slumped forward, gripping tight to the sides of his chair so that he would not fall. The orderly wheeled him to his room, and, when they arrived, he shoved Eddie through the door with such force that the chair tipped over and Eddie, still struggling to put on his pants, slid across the floor.

This was as much punishment as he received. A little cruelty, that’s all. Whatever repercussions he’d anticipated—whatever he felt he deserved—he didn’t get. His worst fear—that his nephew would find out—didn’t manifest. The story stayed within the walls, circulating. It was told and retold among the nurses until it became hilarious, and every time Eddie heard a sudden, cackling laugh he was convinced that it was made at his expense. Every now and again he’d hear, “I know what my brother likes,” whispered behind his back, followed by giggles. Things went as they always had: the bodies came in, exhaled laments or farewells into rarified air, and the bodies went out. The mill churned on.

Eddie left Rosalie smoking her lollipop cigarette. She had said nothing, no scream or curse to send him off properly. But wanting this much would be to haggle with the woman he'd already stolen from.

As he wheeled away, The Sunshine State of Mind Nursing and Rehabilitation Center shivered out of its foundation and rose above the earth. Eddie's guts dropped, as with the first upward movement of an elevator (When had he ridden in an elevator? He remembered no such thing, but there it was). The place tilted in flight, thirty degrees, then sixty. Eddie shouted "no," but only a grunt escaped. He hadn't anticipated taking the nursing home with him, whether to heaven or hell or into the vast tangle of mangrove swamp, where he liked to think the old folks possessed alligators and yawned and hissed through unmarked time.

"You're not coming with me," he said to the walls, the floor, but they were going together, bound up. He pushed the wheels of his chair as hard as he could, urgency spreading over him, the hours closing into fists.

The dining hall was empty. He pried off the lid of the recycling bin and unstrapped himself from his chair. This had been an old haunt. He liked to tip the cans to suck up the remaining soda. Sometimes the cans were half-full; he'd watched the old folks for years without seeing one of them finish an entire can. But he did not want soda now. He wanted to stop the tilting, to cross over on his own terms. He dove into the bin, remembering, in some translucent past, a swimming hole with dark water disturbed by flailed limbs, children screaming, he among them, or trying to be. He dove deeper, swam through the cans, the sharp edges clawing his skin. He was vaguely aware that the stubs of his legs were poking out, and he attempted to dive deeper into the bin.

He waited. As he rustled among the soda cans, their collective tinkling reminded him of Christmas, and then, regrettably, of running water. He wet himself. He squinted and closed his mouth tight as the urine ran down his thigh, onto his stomach and then neck. All this would be over soon. And so Eddie shivered and slipped into darkness among the soda cans.

When he woke, he glided along the white and familiar corridors of the nursing home. His hair stuck to his forehead. He was covered in sticky soda and urine. But the burden of his profane body was being born away. He could just make out his nephew's features, the sharp jaw and thick lips.

"It's you, Nephew" Eddy said, grateful.

"Yea, Uncle, it's me."

"It's nice ... It's more than I deserve."

"They might be upset with us." The youth indicated those behind him, orderlies and nurses, arms folded, expressions grim, gathered to watch the nephew carry Eddie down the lobby and out. What scene had occurred didn't bother Eddie, who silently thanked the young man for grounding the nursing home back into its foundation, where it belonged.

"More than I deserve."

“Maybe,” the nephew agreed, wanting to get away. He looked straight ahead and readjusted Eddie in his arms, bringing him close as if coddling a sleeping child. Eddie rested his head against the young man’s chest, counting and recounting the rapid heartbeats, the only indication of the heaviness of his charge. “Fresh air, Uncle. Breathe.”

No breath. Only the exhaled humming. Deserve ... va, va, va, va, va. How lovely the voice, he thought, his own, quivering its song to loosen and summon the righteous step forward.

# Richard Michael Levine

## A Note on the Type

The text of this book is set in Georgette,  
A fine serif type designed to “kiss” the page  
With an inky flow that’s easy on the eye  
And updated to reproduce better in a digital age.  
The letters are seductive, even racy, in both cases—  
Elegant, confidant, classic yet very contemporary,  
And a touch aggressive with their finishing strokes.  
The airy vowels a, e, o and u  
Float like soap bubbles about to pop  
And moisten the i with a creamy dot on top.  
This font has a friendly, open face with a  
Generously rounded body that’s grounded  
By shapely descenders on the p and y  
Tapering down to daintily shod feet.  
But the lowercase g’s are all belly  
And breast like ancient goddesses.  
The gorgeous Q uses its long tongue  
To lingeringly caress the bottom of the u.  
At the alphabet’s center the O is so wide  
Open it practically cries out to be entered by  
The stiff-angled M, semi-erect N, half-masted  
H or the extended crossbars on the F and E.  
The R’s kick their stretched-out gams like  
A chorus of showgirls at the Folies Bergère,  
And the gentle swells on the b and d  
Mate well with their rigid straights.  
The type has more than its share of ligatures  
Caught in the act, like the fl going at it  
Doggie-style, while the top row is equally  
Bold, with an amphora nearly genital  
In its internal folds and an ampersand like a sheer  
Stocking tossed high before landing on the floor.  
The spread-out V and tightly squeezed-together,  
Bent-legged W—well, quite enough said:  
This font is not meant for a corporate report.

# CONTRIBUTORS

**Nick Bateman** recently earned his MFA in Creative Writing from Lindenwood University. He currently lives with his fiancé in Jefferson City, Missouri, where he is a manager at an independent record store. He is worried that the internet is leaking into real life.

**Maria Burns** has published short fiction in *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal*, *Troubadour*, *Among These Hills*, and *The Blackwater Review*. She holds a Master of Arts in English Literature from the University of West Florida. She is a commercial pilot, and when she's not flying or writing furiously, Maria enjoys sailing around Florida's Emerald Coast. She lives in Santa Rosa Beach with her husband, two young sons, and a dog named Twist.

**Lesley Clinton** has published poems have appeared in *The Heron's Nest*, *Literary Mama*, *A Handful of Stones*, and *Laurels*, with another piece forthcoming in *Frogpond Journal*. She is a freelance writer with a background in English Language Arts education. She currently serves as the editor of a riveting fantasy fiction series.

**Eli Edelson** is a recent graduate from the University of Chicago, where he majored in English and Creative Writing. Currently, he works in the film industry by day and attempts to write screenplays and short fiction by night. He lives in Brooklyn, NY. This is his first published work.

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**John Gorman** snapped the Eyesore of the week for the Queens Ledger before his stories made it into print. Now he spits wine for a living. His work has appeared in *Monkeybicycle*, *Apt*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Boston Literary Magazine and Writer's Digest*, and elsewhere. His debut novel *Shades of Luz* is published by All Things That Matter Press. He earned my MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific University. He blogs at [jgpapercut.blogspot.com](http://jgpapercut.blogspot.com).

**Greg Jenkins** is Professor of English at Garrett College in McHenry, Maryland. He has had three books and roughly forty-five stories

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**Richard Michael Levine** has been a magazine writer and editor for many national publications. He was a contributing editor and columnist for *Esquire* and wrote a bestselling nonfiction book, *Bad Blood: A Family Murder in Marin County*, that was translated into several languages. He is looking for a publisher for a recently completed collection of poetry, *Catch*, as well as a short story collection, *The Man Who Gave Away His Organs*. He lives in Oakland, California.

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**Tom Pescatore** grew up outside Philadelphia dreaming of the endless road ahead, carrying the idea of the fabled West in his heart. He maintains a poetry blog: [amagicalmistake.blogspot.com](http://amagicalmistake.blogspot.com). His work has been published in literary magazines both nationally and internationally but he'd rather have them carved on the Walt Whitman bridge or on the sidewalks of Philadelphia's old Skid Row.

**Richard T. Rauch** has published poetry in *Confrontation*, *decomP*, *Grey Sparrow*, *The Oxford American*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Quiddity*, and *Wild Violet*, among others. Three of his poems are in the *Love Notes* poetry anthology (Vagabondage Press, 2012), and his flash fiction has appeared in *Infective Ink* and *Aspen Idea*. One piece was selected as a finalist in the 2012 Aspen Writers' Foundation/Esquire Short, Short Fiction Contest. Born and raised in the suburbs of New Orleans, he currently lives along Bayou Lacombe in southeast Louisiana.

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**Andrea Rummel** is a senior at the University of Chicago and an aspiring biologist, nature photographer, and cheeseburger connoisseur.

**Joan Ryan**, who headed her own direct marketing agency for over thirty years, now lives in Taos, New Mexico, where she indulges her passions for writing poetry, skiing, and cooking Mediterranean foods. Her poems appear or are forthcoming in *Nimrod*, *The Atlanta Review*, *Roanoke Review*, *Calyx*, *Ekphrasis*, *Cape Rock*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Concho River Review*, *Off The Coast*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Taos Journal of Poetry and Art*, and other journals, as well as in the anthology *Poems for Malala Yousafzai*.

**Lee Varon** is originally from Chicago and a writer and clinical social worker. Her poetry and short stories have been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and published in *A & U AIDS Magazine*, *Artful Dodge*, *Black River Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Common Journeys*, *Fox Cry Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *High Plains Literary Review*, *Lumina*, *The Maverick Press Journal*, *Milkweed Chronicle*, *The New Renaissance*, *Owen Wister Review*, *Oyez Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Permafrost*, *Pleiades*, *The Puckerbush Review*, *RE:AL*, *River City*, *The Rockford Review*, *Sibyl-Child*, *Sojourner*, *So To Speak*, *Soundings East*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Writers Forum*, *Spare Change News*, and *Oddball Magazine*.

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