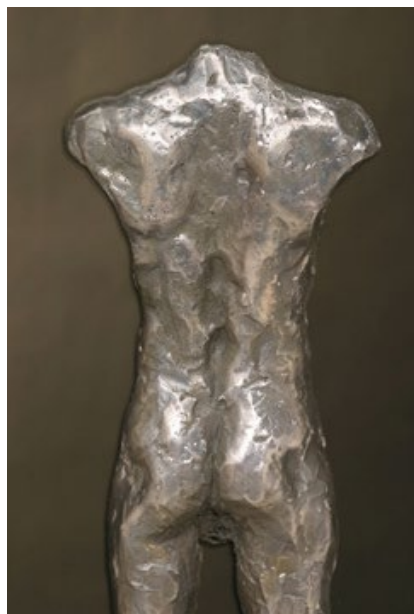
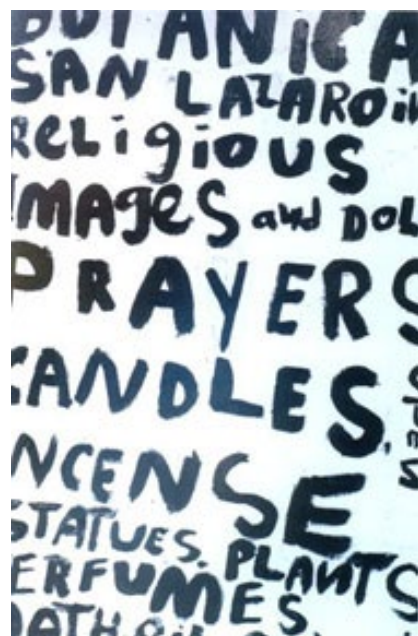


Dialectic vs. Antinomy

features poetry essays **fiction** nonfiction art



Camila Fernandez - Lemniscus Detail



Jake Watling - Prayers

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Lullaby

Barbara Jane Reyes

Another Rain Dream

Jennifer Chapis

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Sculpture and Paintings

Camila Fernandez



Lemniscus Detail



SF Fire Hydrant



Whale Tooth Pendant



Pigeons



Raku Torso

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Paintings and Photographs

Jake Watling



Sacrifice the Self, 2007, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 48"



Catch Me If You Can, 2005, acrylic and Ink on canvas, 57" x 89"



Used Cars, 2005, acrylic and Ink on found wood panel, 40" x 72"

DOTANICA
SAN LAZARO
RELIGIOUS
IMAGES and DO
PRAYERS
CANDLES
INCENSE
STATUES. PLANTS
PERFUMES.
BATH OIL

Prayers, 2003, c-print



Holy Family Shops, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 31" x 30"

A Letter to Kilgore Trout

Ryan Bird

Dear Kilgore,

At this very moment, I am writing you this letter upon a series of glossy fliers promoting various ethnic massages. The windshield of my sedan is so littered with these distractions that I possess little hope of seeing oncoming traffic ever again. In short sir, I am asleep. I have lodged myself in Ilium, New York, & I cannot awake. Do you know a way out, a secret off ramp, or perhaps some direct route that requires a complete lack of vision? I have a keen suspicion that I'm snoring rather loudly, & am undoubtedly annoying my fellow passengers in the nearby Dining Car, so I shall be brief: Help. I am located in the third row of the Red Light Lot of the Pan-Amorous Mall in North by North West Ilium. The crowds of shoppers are swirling around me, Kilgore, so time is of the essence. You see, last night a vote was cast by the Ruling Party which decreed that all non-reproductive sexual fetishes would, not only be legally sanctioned, but receive monetary government sponsorship. The only catch is that all likeminded partners must be paired up within an allotted time. Oh Kilgore, I have no partner. I have no time. My last hope is to be directed out of Ilium. I have simple wishes: I merely wish to wake up beside the Dining Car window; I simply wish to consume my whole wheat tuna melt while a harsh landscape, that I cannot help but distinguish, zips by me in glorious reverse, like a malfunctioning teleportation device.

Sincerely,
Ryan

Contributors

Elmaz Abinader is a writer, poet, and playwright from Oakland, CA. Her works include a memoir, *Children of the Roojme*, a *Family's Journey from Lebanon*, and a poetry collection, *In the Country of My Dreams*. She has toured with 4 performance pieces and the Country of Origin Band. Her forthcoming works are another memoir, *When Silence Was Frightening*, and a poetry collection, *The Torture Quartet and other Acts of Poetry*. She teaches at Mills College. Her website can be visited at www.elmazabinader.com

Jay C. Barmann is a fiction writer living in San Francisco.

Ryan Bird's poems have been accepted in over 100 places. He is featured on Latchkey.net, the TothWorld Podcasts, and will also appear in the *Outside Voices* anthology of 2008. His latest chapbook, *A Foldout Map of North Purgatory*, will be published through Plan B Press in the fall of 2007. He operates Um, Yeah Press, edits a tiny magazine called *Twaddle*, and urges you to please visit his blog. It lives here: robotkissingbooth.blogspot.com.

Jennifer Chapis is author of the chapbook, *The Beekeeper's Departure* (Backwards City Press 2007) and a limited-edition broadside, "Poem as Tossed Salad" (Center for Book Arts 2002). She has published poems with *The Iowa Review*, *DIAGRAM*, *Hotel America*, *McSweeney's*, *Barrow Street*, *Quarterly West*, the [Best New Poets](#) anthology series, and others. Her work was recently recognized with the Florida Review Editor's Prize, the [GSU Review Poetry Prize](#), and a Pushcart nomination. Jennifer lives in California, where she operate a Web site marketing company, [WebAha!](#), with her husband, fiction writer [Josh Goldfaden](#).

Robin Demers is a poet who lives in San Francisco and is the author of two chapbooks, *Two Red-Fingered Moons* and *Face of the Sea Lion*. She has studied privately with Diane di Prima and founded the All Poets Welcome Reading Series. She currently attends the MFA in Writing Program at the University of San Francisco and works for the University of California Press.

Camila Fernandez is a San Francisco-based fine art sculptor and painter. A graduate of the Academy of Art University, she now shows in the Wendt Gallery in Laguna Beach, California. Camila is also a teacher at Artworks Fine Art Studio in San Francisco. Camila has been featured in *The Artist's Magazine* and [ArtKudos.com](#). Her work can be seen at www.camilafernandez.com. Camila and her husband, Andrew, will be welcoming their first baby boy in November.

Allison Goldstein grew up in South Florida, and after trying out a few other states, currently resides in the San Francisco Bay Area. She received her MFA in Creative Writing from the California College of the Arts in 2006 and has been published in *Maximum Rock'n'Roll*, and *Italics Mine*, among others, and currently writes educational articles about sexual health for Good Vibrations.

Amy Jackson is a Canadian/Australian currently living in Melbourne, Australia. Her short stories and poetry have appeared in literary anthologies and journals in Australia and internationally. In 2006, she was Highly Commended in the word category in the Spirit of Youth Australia Awards and is a 2007 finalist for Young Writer of the Year by the Sunshine Coast Literary Association.

Stacey Levine is a Seattle-based fiction writer whose books include *My Horse and Other Stories*, and *Dra--*, a novel, both published by Sun & Moon Press of L.A. Her second novel, *Frances Johnson*, was published by Clear Cut Press of Portland, Oregon, and was a finalist for Washington State's 2006 Book Award. She has won a PEN/West Fiction Award, an Artist Trust Fellowship. Her work has appeared in the *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, the *American Book Review*, *The Stranger*, *The Seattle Times*, Fodor's travel guides, and various anthologies. Formerly a creative writing instructor, she is now working on a second collection of short fiction.

Miranda Mellis is the author of *The Revisionist* (Calamari Press, 2007) and an editor at *The Encyclopedia Project*. Her work has appeared in various publications, including, most recently, *Tin House*, *Harper's*, and *Post Road*.

Barbara Jane Reyes is the author of *Gravities of Center* (Arkipelago, 2003) and *Poeta en San Francisco* (Tinfish, 2005), which received the James Laughlin Award of the Academy of American Poets. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *2nd Avenue Poetry*, *American Poet: The Journal of the Academy of American Poets*, *Achiote Press*, *Action Yes*, *Asian Pacific American Journal*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Chain*, *Crate*, *Interlope*, *New American Writing*, *Nocturnes Review*, *North American Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Octopus Magazine*, *Parthenon West Review*, *Shampoo Poetry*, *Tinfish*, *Versal*, *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*, and others. She lives with her husband, poet Oscar Bermeo, in Oakland.

In creating his artwork, rendered in his trademark graphic style with a bright color palette, **Jake Watling** draws from his environment and his past and present experiences. He utilizes imagery such as architecture, signage, people, and animals to explore such subjects as fear, money, myth, and religion. Watling has shown his artwork in San Francisco at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Bucheon Gallery, and Receiver Gallery. He has also exhibited his artwork in Minneapolis, New York City, Oakland, San Francisco, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. He received his BFA from the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul, Minnesota, and now lives in Berkeley, California, with his wife and dog.

Malena Watrous is a recent Jones Lecturer in Fiction Writing at Stanford University, where she was a Wallace Stegner fellow. She received her MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and was a Truman Capote fellow. Her fiction has been published in such literary journals as *Story Quarterly*, *Triquarterly*, and *The Massachusetts Review*, and her non-fiction has appeared on Salon.com and in *The Believer*. She got her start writing restaurant reviews for *Time Out New York* and now contributes regular book reviews to *The San Francisco Chronicle*. She is currently finishing a novel, for which she received a Michener-Copernicus award in 2006.

AN OVARY BURSTS

Jennifer Chapis

I am stuck inside a birdhouse fire.

Through the eyes
of jays, I fill with blood.

One is scratching,
shifting like a heart deciding to start again.

On the contrary, melts the copper roof.

Switchback

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Issue 6: Dialectic vs Antinomy

A Publication of the USF MFA in Writing Program

crossings: heaven's gate

Valerie Witte

comet hiding drugged
 and suffocated three Applewhite and Nettles
 bellwether ride a spacecraft
 built of tires travel in pairs to recruit living
 in a darkened house the hilltop souls detached
 simulate interplanetary
 journey tended to extraterrestrial everyone
 the same stopgap a mission frocked
 monastic campaign drank citrus

 ambrosia disembodied

 in shifts phenobarbital mixed
 a western necropolis
 plastic bags securing their necks in sleep and wake

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Fish

Allison Goldstein

I am a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols, alas! —Robert Lowell

rays fingering deep
into the crevices
of all things—
hands that separate movement

from the source no
longer a ray fissures
the gray sea from air, plucks

not a fish but an image
transposed wet-gilled
to the page. It is
a lot to ask

these rays
now fish now
fingers feeling thick
into the roots
to distinguish such design.

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(the art gallery)

Elmaz Abinader

The house was filled with light. It was early evening and I was at a party in the East end of Jerusalem—on the Palestinian side. The guests were in tight urgent conversations with one another. Most people were smoking; no one seemed to be eating although a table along one wall of the room displayed small dishes with shiny olives, stacks of Arabic bread, smooth-surfaced dips, and rounds of crisp-looking cucumber. I held a ginger ale and introduced myself to no one, just ambled around, glancing at a painting of an old Moroccan market, running my finger along the mother of pearl shaped into a diamond on the lid of a mosaic box. Many of the things on the shelves were familiar: etched brass plates, blue glass bottles, a brass incense burner. This could be a house in Jordan or Lebanon with its stone exterior, cold floors, and brocade furniture. But it was not. In Palestine, where I couldn't sleep, where I couldn't write; where my thinking became frantic. My starling wings were stilled and immobile. I counted my steps, closed my ears, ruffled my feathers.

The party was for a consulate official who was retiring. It had nothing to do with my visit and I was relieved. My country host, Dena, bought me along and my presence here was unexpected and a little insignificant. I assured her I was fine alone taking everything in, the room, the guests. She offered me more to drink and introduced me to some people whose names I didn't remember a few seconds later. We spoke for a minute about the party, my impressions of Palestine, and went our separate ways—they to friends, me to walking along the tile of the house, drifting in and out of small groups.

I wandered into the small enclosed porch where several men were speaking in Arabic. Two were looking out the window at the approaching twilight. A man with a beard greeted me in Arabic, asking the question that prompted me to give my name and to apologize that I didn't speak Arabic.

The only man in a suit responded, "Yes, the writer, Dena told us you would be here." He introduced himself as Nabeel and presented his three companions.

Their names passed in a small breeze above my head but I stayed there caught in their solace, the meditative mood that filled the air. Nabeel pointed to the other men who were standing together. "These are the greatest Palestinian artists and we're talking about their new show."

I turned to them, one bearded with romantic eyes, the other quite tall and almost sandy-haired, and the last was bald and older than the other two. "It's such a pleasure to meet you. I feel this is great luck for me to be here now." I was not sure they understood me but my body was lifting toward them. "Tell me about your work."

The bearded one turned to his friends and translated. He shifted his eyes back to me and spoke quite quickly but softly. "I used to paint with oils and do some sculptures, but the three of us agreed to only use materials that comes from here." He poked two fingers toward the ground. "Here from Palestine."

I looked at the floor, the flat ceramic tile in a sandy shade. My inner voice repeated what he said, using Palestine in their work. Using their country to create art, their country, occupied and invaded. There was a life under this floor, I remembered, a land that was perpetual even in the midst of the battle. Under my feet as I walked from one end of Jerusalem to another were the grains of multiple histories, stones of many memories; earth that grew hate, anger, protection, and possession. I toured Jerusalem with my head lifted, examining the architecture of the past, the icons of each legacy that built this city. This artist traveled head down targeting materials among the scrub of Palestine. I tried to imagine his hands scooping up the dirt underneath.

"Do you mean you make clay from the earth of Palestine?"

He rubbed his forefinger and thumb together then pulled them back quickly. "We do. We takes plants and makes colors." His arms opened. "And, and..." His gaze fogged a little.

"Just natural things or salvage too?"

He turned toward Nabeel who shrugged his shoulders, moved a hand side to side.

I shifted.

Nabeel asked, "Explain again."

"I understand how natural things from the plants and dirt of Palestine are used. I was asking if there are other things, like old things, thrown away things."

Nabeel nodded and interpreted for the artist. What piece of Palestine constructed the canvas or the figure and form? Whose footprints were in the colors of his paintings?

"Not me, no. He indicated the taller artist. "He use pipes and wires and bombs pieces and bullet.... things."

"Shells." I offered.

The sculptor pantomimed wire bending with his hands.

"How big are the sculptures?" I flattened my hand beside me as if I was describing the height of a child.

He raised it until it was above my head.

"I understand."

The sculptor spoke to the painter and then left the room.

"Yes, we use nothing artificial at all. Not for color, not for frame."

I pictured his hands plucking leaves from bushes growing from the gravelly earth, smelling them, putting them in a pot. The reds were pushed from flowers and extracted from seeds; the greens from grasses and stems; the yellows swiped from bushes and weeds. He offered me a filterless cigarette, took one himself and in the glow of the flame, his eyes burned too. The artist picked a piece of tobacco from his tongue. The fingers that scooped up the earth. This was ownership; this was distilling the land of occupation. Transforming it. Grain by grain he was gathering Palestine in a way it could not be taken from him.

"May I see your work?"

"It is very close by," he threw his hand toward the window. " At a very good gallery."

I mentally reviewed my schedule. I could borrow a driver and maybe go some afternoon when I was not booked. Perhaps he could explain the construction of his pieces, show me how he created his colors, describe his themes. I imagined taking pictures of the artists beside their pieces and learning their stories to take back with me. This would be a great gift to receive while I was here—rather than another book, another manuscript, a promise to try and translate someone's work, I could carry the sense of Palestine through the eyes of this painter. The other guests were a low hum and seemed to be far away. I was excited. Grey air was quiet outside the porch, rows of houses marched up the hill. Where could the gallery be?

"I would love to come to the gallery, but I would like to come when you are there. When could that be?"

He dropped the cigarette onto the floor and stomped on it while he translated to his friends. They snorted some response that involved hands and head shakes.

The bearded artist stared out the window, his face now in profile. "I cannot join you."

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to impose." My hands were sweaty and I watched a small white car climb the stone street. "You must be very busy and in high demand."

"You see, the gallery is on the other side of the border."

"But I thought you said it was nearby."

Every place I traveled, short or long distances, I was surprised by the number of checkpoints, the inspections and the interrogations of my driver or of me. The borders became familiar, and when I saw a group of soldiers standing along the road, I automatically pulled out my passport.

"Yes," he nodded and pointed up the street. I followed his fingers to the top of the hill. The road crested next to a jumble of a children's park with a slide and some swings. "The border is there."

Suddenly near the playground next to houses that resembled the house where we were standing, I could make out, as plain as the moon, a small guard house. Sitting in the entrance, a sentry was smoking and blowing long streams that were caught by the street light. His M-16 was on his lap angled toward the sky.

Although I spent most of the night watching the dusk arrive, the street turn from white to gray, I missed this detail—this signpost reminding me that the mosaic boxes in this living room weren't the ones on my coffee table in California, or the brass plates weren't the set hanging on the walls of my mother's family house in Lebanon. The artist understood this. He recognized the intangible lines in the dark, the ones that divided standing at a dinner party from being handcuffed on the roadside. I did not have the eyes of the Palestinian who knew where he could step and move, whose foot on one block that resembled another block that could be home was across the parallel of safety, was over the DMZ, was forever in prison, was suspicion of terrorism, was the end to a house, or school or the wholeness of his family.

I stepped away from the window as if I had crossed the line. I was so lucky. My writing was portable, could be folded and tucked in my back pocket. My books could be printed and copied, distributed and read. His paintings were confined not only to the small audience that viewed them but from the artist as well, from their fatherland. The water around my heart was rising, the tide was in.

I turned back to the artist. Sifting through the words that would say...the sorrow I wanted to express, I found myself muted. We stood in silence and kept our eyes on the road. I was anxious seeing a playground, a border, a rifle. This was occupation. This was everyday for the artist, his family, his friends, his town. But I imagined he was not seeing this—he was staring at the gallery where his paintings hung—just out of his reach.

four humours

Diana Spieker

{sanguine}

when supple the fritter and succulent flux
 of canto like roosters all brimming
 with full throated holler the sun hail the sun wow the days
 are so goddish the hours enchanted the ruffles are hoisted
 yes certain revival of bee teeming pollen
 for sure in the snow melt for reals this is spring check the
 envoys of art that leap from your face to the sea of loud birth
 hallelujah new textures that pirate the senses —
 are you enjoyfulled? it springs

{choleric}

black - tantrum color of jungle seethe - immaculate
 swerve of instinct - mechanical praxis of maul - creature
 possessed by slaughter fury- in a fit of serrated fire -
 beast lunge - throbbing with summer current and burn -
 blistering hot do not touch - surges frenetic singses with gall

{melancholic}

autumn is a bawling slut... scab tattered razors pull me from... spell of sleep into deafening insomnia...
rain fills with black bile before it slicks the wind
to mud my joints... pitched cells know the coiled aftermath of opium...
but never tasted the numb...what useless facts seep into my lungs to tilt
and choke attention...I've memorized where I'm not but should be... ever the shrieking revelators claw the
surface with dry quills.

{phlegmatic}

frozen water season
mill road pond
chock still
echo is dead
long live the grave
winter without end
ripple maker dozing
even my meditated panting
makes no difference

It Was a Mild Form

Robin Demers

It was a mild form of
something that took me
on a fast walk

And all flesh perished that moved upon the earth
red rose squatted in its glass
a ficus outside the window shook
in the winter storm
let me begin again

with a pathological humor
did you say *Die*?

let me start over
the mild took us
for a walk in the fast rain

Perish moves the earth upon...

crossings: fat boy

Valerie Witte

ferried overnight city to
monumenting heat
charred grass and skin drizzle
as enemies or melted gods
angry houses tile
ceramic mother buried
children with a tricycle
and smoke only hinting, forgiving as dome
perversed keep the skeleton
remember transfigured bottle sake bridge Kannon fountain
pen clinging belt memento
Phoenix trees exposed camphor, persimmon
cranes decorate the stone
lantern white turned streetcars running
a stack of mottled needles

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Penny

Miranda Mellis

Fifteen-year-old Jim was first initiated into the raptures of love after fixing a married woman's flat in a 7-11 parking lot.

There is a narrowness to him, his nose is like a slash of ice, thinks Penny. In the taut flesh housing the numerous delicate bones of Jim, however, Penny discovers there is vigor and hot solace. She dreams of him every night.

Don't do it again, she thinks, snap out of it.

Jim's beauty only exacerbates the ambivalence, the sadness with which she contemplates her husband, Tim. Tim who never fails to complain about the bill in the expensive, stylish restaurants he nonetheless insists they frequent. The exorbitantly priced dinners are hardly tasted by Penny anyway, effaced by recollections of the simple, pretty kindnesses of Jim. Jim with lashes like a stripper, who reverently indulged her. The hairy-backed Tim, on the other hand, himself resembling a horsefly, called her a flytrap.

Her husband Tim was the undermining friend, the giver of the backhanded compliment ('you look good for your age'; 'for a little guy you're pretty strong'). There were many counts against him. Yet many of his fetishes were perfectly compatible with hers, from the 'hole in the sheet' method to the 'witch on fire,' the 'child bride' to 'poison palace intrigue.'

They went to other cities on their trips. She would have liked to visit the countryside on their vacations, but didn't have the energy to fight him on it—he didn't like the color green. Nature was boring, and furthermore mountains gave him vertigo, he claimed, which wasn't true. He was not the dizzy type. He would not have admitted to his real discomfort, even if he had been conscious of it, that vibrating, open swathes of land—desert, forest or sea—gave him a disagreeable sensation of non-existence.

Upon finding her staring at Jim, the cashier at 7-11, where they stopped one day for aspirin, Tim snorted scornfully, and his back spread out like a parachute. He placed his arm possessively around her and she trembled at his touch despite herself.

Pleasure, she thought, is not the same as happiness.

The married woman's head hung, her hair curled and swung, like old ivy.

Interview with Stacey Levine

Jay Barmann

Stacey Levine is a Seattle-based fiction writer whose books include *My Horse and Other Stories*, and *Dra--*, a novel, both published by Sun & Moon Press of L.A. Her second novel, *Frances Johnson*, was published by Clear Cut Press of Portland, Oregon, and was a finalist for Washington State's 2006 Book Award. She has won a PEN/West Fiction Award, an Artist Trust Fellowship. Her work has appeared in the *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, the *American Book Review*, *The Stranger*, *The Seattle Times*, Fodor's travel guides, and various anthologies. Formerly a creative writing instructor, she is now working on a second collection of short fiction.

You probably get this a lot, but I think the main reason I'm a fan of your work has to do with style and tone—there is something unique in the way you blend light and dark, absurd and grotesque. Your writing makes me think of David Lynch only more heightened, with better dialogue. Who/what would you say your influences are, or how would you describe how your style took shape?

As a student I read lots of Kafka, Duras, even Wittig. Voice-driven writing of all kinds. Like a lot of people in school, I adored the idea of disputing realism's conventions. I don't have as much of a problem with those conventions now. Except they still couch lots and lots of terrible writing. You picked up on something—I really paid attention to Lynch's films. They floor me. My favorite is his early short "The Grandmother." I think a writer's style also emerges wholly organically, too, that is, from the person's brain/body, i.e., if the brain contains a certain amount of stored fear, for example, or awe, or learned generosity, anything like that will flavor the writing.

One of your recurring themes is physical abnormality—I'm thinking in particular of the stories "The Hump" and "The Son" and Frances' face in *Frances Johnson*. Doctors show up a fair amount, too. I mean, bodies are strange things, but is there anything in particular you want to say about the body, or about medicine?

This device comes straight out of the tradition of fairy (and other) tales. The witch—a dubious person—has a wart on her nose. The good princess has flaxen hair. It's never that the princess has brown frizzy hair. So physical type is indicative of character. I like playing with that overly simplistic kind of frame. But there's something else, too. It's very clear, if you read psychiatrists' case studies, that people commonly somatize their emotions. The body expresses what the voice cannot. It's really common for a kid who feels fundamentally unloved to have chronic acne. Even blackouts and dizziness and stomach pain, like 80 percent of it is caused by "feelings." I'm not saying the ailments aren't real. I work in a hospital part-time, and you see this all the time, even in emergency room cases. So, for me, it's satisfying to create characters who, like many real people, are unaware that their symptoms may express repressed emotions.

Another recurring theme or image which always makes me laugh in your stories is food. Food often seems to be a joke in your work, whether it's a lump of gray meat, or "a beef luncheon at a nearby restaurant" or the strange, hard seeded crackers in *Frances Johnson*. There doesn't need to be a conscious reason for this, but since we're talking here... is there?

Food is part of life...

I guess I'm just wondering if there is anything besides dark humor behind the images of food as, like, unappetizing but necessary.

This might depend on the story/passage to which you're referring. Sometimes the food might be like a character's

physical appearance, i.e., a reflection or metaphor of an inner psychiatric state (i.e., bad or gross food). It's also a trick of composition. Adding disparate elements to a fictional composition can be a good thing, because it adds textural layers.

Do you prefer the novel form over the short story, or vice versa? I feel like you tend to want to subvert the traditional demands of the form anyway, but does the novel have any demands that are harder, or more annoying, to fulfill?

I prefer the short story form. The opportunity to be super-precise appeals to me. Yes, novels are more annoying, because you usually have to flesh things out, and I am all over that breathtaking opportunity for art in brevity.

***Frances Johnson* is set in a small, fictional Florida town called Munson where there is a volcano called Sharla. Why Florida?**

I'm not really sure, but I liked that it has three syllables. Also, I lived in Fort Lauderdale for a short while. That state is like no other with its ambience of mayhem and disaster.

So, the theme of this issue of Switchback is Dialectic vs. Antimony. As one of the editors put it, this is both a mouthful and a headful. But I see a lot of antimony in your work—characters who will simply never understand each other, ideas that will never coalesce, creatures (like the small, dog-like horse in "My Horse," and the dog in *Frances Johnson*) who will never come to terms with their human owners. Can't we all just get along?

I think you mean acidic, distressing relationships between people. I don't think that is the big theme of my work, though it might be a side effect of my themes. My work would be more about the individual struggling to master autonomy, authentic presence, and so-called selfhood among intimate others—family, neighbors, etc.—despite all kinds of abuse and subterranean psychological barriers that make the world dystopic and weird. And no, we cannot all just get along! That only happens on Teletubbies. The world is more complex than that.

Hole

Barbara Jane Reyes

The girl next door is waiting for you to _____ her. Nevermind whether she is catalogue busty Oriental or steamy Latina. The girl next door is waiting for you to shoot your load, so lengthen and harden your critical theory of grand narrative. Can you fit yourself inside her hole she takes it in the _____; she is waiting. Think Vaseline, think shallow breathing, think yank up her skirt. Whatever she is she is a slut she is wet she is spread open wide panting broken pulled open bound bled. She is deep she is pulling from the throat she is making noise making miniskirt hot tight. She is a metaphor, an uproarious dominatrix consumed with your ethics. You are asking for clarification, for a spot of vulnerability, where she is tender, worn and rubbed to rawness. Blow her and the air smarts. She is a contusion calcified infection. She is not tucked between her thighs. She is muffled space windless. She is not a slippery conduit for your pathos. She is decentralized, adaptive. She is handing you her reins, having relinquished notions of bliss as indicated by keywords: plume, fragrant, dictation. She is absence of scribe, annotation, and overcompensation. She's weary of your abstracts, diversions, and chalk scrawls. She is the price of admission, carnival brochure gloss religion. She is your rite of passage; this means she will lube your rod in a way it has never been lubed before. Here is her open mouth, stretched open for you to push yourself into this lipsticked mouth you have permission to shove in all lost children nightmares broken beer bottles cigarette ash splintered crucifixion poison flowers antidepressant side effects television commercials and pity fucks. She will teach you rituals to survive drought, fertilize the dirt, and spill yourself into it. She will sell you magic pills packed into hand-sewn hemp pockets. She is a dying star, and so when you enter her, she pulls you in hard. You enter her lightless and wet warehoused body, oxidized and crumbling. Were she beautiful you would call her patina spire stretching to sky. She is frayed copper wire dynamite stimuli. Don't be a manifesto or cliché. Continue to drawl and to smash, to ensconce inside her deep, deep dark.

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Corky

Miranda Mellis

Jo Anne was watching a nature show, with the sound off. At first there were leggy, prancing birds—they reminded her of pimps. Then lolling seals, their heads slippery and round, like black stones with eyes—they reminded her of dogs. Now there was a telethon. She hunched over a lottery ticket scratching away with a penny. The rickety card table shook. All three televisions were on. Jo Anne's was muted. She could hear the others, Uncle Murray's baseball game, her daughter watching a game show. Combined they sounded indistinct, patter like rain.

Jo Anne took inventory of the refrigerator. Pickles, mayonnaise, rye bread, beer, sliced turkey, cottage cheese, and pharmaceuticals. She reached for the pills. A small whale-shaped hump splayed across her left trapezoid.

Jo Anne and her daughter Joanne went to the Stop & Shop to collect Jo Anne's lottery winnings, three dollars. Corky, the clerk, was reading the obituaries. Jo Anne placed her green plastic shopping basket on the counter. Corky scanned nylons, one box of toothpicks, and one Enquirer, a bottle of Pantene shampoo, a carton of Marlboro Lights, a shower curtain lining, and two pair black trouser socks for Uncle Murray. When Jo Anne and Joanne got to the parking lot, they found a cell phone on the ground behind the car. They went back in and gave the cell phone to Corky.

By the end of the workday, no one had come to claim the phone. Corky brought it home. Corky was preparing dinner when the cell phone rang. It had two short rings. She stopped slicing sausage to answer. A wheezy, male voice on the other end said, "Hey Sal. You want me to pick anything up on my way home?" Corky dropped the phone, suddenly bent with a sharp pain, her hands on the plastic cutting board. Her husband was napping on the couch. He didn't wake up. The voice on the phone said, "Hello? Sally?" Corky straightened up. She turned off the phone. Breathing deeply she pressed slices of plantain flat and cast them into a frying pan.

Corky read the obituaries habitually. She often thought about the apocalypse. If it came soon, she wouldn't have to die alone. She wasn't feeling well at all lately. Her body gave her impossible trouble. She sometimes thought about ending it. She thought about it like a criminal: how can I murder myself and make it look like an accident? It was important that she not be blamed for it. She pulled the kitchen window curtain open to a purple, dying sky while the plantains simmered.

At 2:30 the following afternoon, a giant of a man wearing a faded brown trench coat queried Gina, who worked behind the counter with Corky, about a lost cell phone. "My wife lost her cell phone, and she thinks she left it here. Has anyone turned in a phone?" Gina shrugged. The man looked at Corky. She made a prune face and shrugged. She did not want to admit she had taken the phone home and hung up on him the night before when she had the stomach cramp. The man went to the door, his shoulders sagging. "Wait!" Corky called after him. "Do you want to leave a name in case someone finds it?" The man left his name and number. His cursive was large but delicate, with subtle loops.

Corky habitually stole a certain cream from the store. The cream was supposed to get rid of stretch marks and varicose veins, but so far it hadn't worked. She had mossy blue veins twisting and arcing under her skin, like vines swirling downriver. When she got home that night Corky applied the cream.

Corky called the number the pasty man had left. Next to the number he had written his name, Arias McIntyre. "Is Mr. McIntyre there?" Corky asked. At the other end of the line, Arias said, "Yea, speaking." "Who is it Arias?" his wife Sally called from the bathroom down the hall. She was about to take pumice to her corns. "Who is this?" he asked. But there was no answer. Corky was having a stomach cramp. She dropped the phone.

Arias thumped his knuckles distractedly on the red banister of a narrow, curving stairwell. Sally was sitting on the side of the tub, tending her feet. "Who is it?" she said again.

Corky picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hello."

Arias came into the bathroom five minutes later and said, "Someone found your phone." Corky and Arias had made arrangements to meet. Corky's husband, a night courier, was asleep on the couch. He didn't stir when she left the house.

Arias stumped slowly down the red stairs leaning heavily on the banister. "I'm going to get the phone Sal." At Two Jacks, Arias ordered a whiskey and heaved into his usual booth which was upholstered in old green leather, torn in places. A fake log flickered in his view. He sipped and waited.

When she arrived, Arias didn't recognize her from the store. She looked awry.

The sounds of the bar rushed indiscriminately through Corky. She put the phone down and leaned heavily on the table, breathing. Her face was warped like a mask left in the rain.

Sigh

Allison Goldstein

a little breath

(a little breath that walks)

the way an over-ripe
peach swims
through your mouth, ribbons

the knots of your stomach into rope.

(her breath,
a waltz)

Its shape a mouthless word;
mouth a half-held shape—

(feathered high into the salted air)

a body stuck to the mouth.

(slanted— (a breath that tilts each)
stalk)

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Issue 6: Dialectic vs Antinomy

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crossings: the bridge

Valerie Witte

eddy trapped neap tide veering to Farallon
 plastic bracelets tucked in the pockets glue
 girls sever eyes and cheeks crab feed
 liver rupture salt stir fog
 of Alcatraz and Treasure
 Island midair ankles shortfall wistful a rope looped
 black gloved hand grasping visible through rail
 palings, sunglasses ironworkers masked safety
 goggled stand-by to repair vertebrae snap magnets
 before barriers beam as nylon chord one
 look tomorrow revisited

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War Sonnet

Barbara Jane Reyes

1.

Every minute's a crescent moon, deep gorges
 Carved into skin's softest bleeding places.
 Never trust men with messianic dreams,
 Whose glassy eyes gleam with enemy fatalities.
 No such thing as saviors in the middle of war's
 Open stretches of horizon, nowhere to run.
 It begins, the opening act of this war theatre
 Brought to you by global media corporation's
 Reek and ooze of sanitized liberation bullshit -
 Crude oil and gas prices skyrocket,
 And so let us bomb them all to kingdom come,
 Cradle of western antiquity, Lion of Babylon.
 Let us crumble all the oil-swollen Arab families
 To rubble - and remake the savage of history.

2.

In this land of the crescent moon, white supremacists howl.
 Jetfighters shoot their loads upon oil fields ablaze.
 Tactical advisors stroke their missiles,
 Jam radio frequencies, and fall from grace
 Again and again, at the mouth of biblical rivers.
 This ain't no Garden of Eden no more, so stand tall.
 Jitters? Bite Down. Bite Down. Don't feel. Bite harder.
 Just brace yourself and blow, son. It's time to test your mettle.
 After the bombs' initial shock and awe
 Reigning down sandstorms, it's business as usual -
 Demilitarized zone advances, rehearsed suicide
 Obedience. Dig a hole in the desert to sleep at night.
 Keep your boots and gas mask on. Read the subtext:
 This ain't no dress rehearsal. This is what happens next.

3.

Instruments of devil-may-care offensive campaigns,
 Military hard-on's for such brutal desire -
 Young Americans birth gang rape over card games.
 Veiled virgins bleed. Stripped bodies stacked and wired.
 Prisoner pornography, this perverse inventory
 Naked and hooded for Polaroids (Thumbs up! Hi mom!),
 Dragged by the penis, sodomized with efficiency,
 Souls crushed under boots, phosphoric acid ablution.
 When we come to lust for war, we cease to be human.

Killing and fucking machines, medaled and ribboned,
Obscene creatures trained to administer shame.
Ugly Americans, pissing on the corpses we've burned.
Taunting the enemy in mass graves, we lord over
Unnamed bones of starved and tortured third world soldiers.

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Ashes

Peter Sheehy

Darrell leaned over the pedestal sink, cupping water in his palms and splashing his face, and he told his sister about it. She sat on the motel bed, maybe listening, probably shaking her leg, dangling an unlit cigarette from her fingertips. Mid-afternoon in South Central Florida, and on the carpet stood two urns: one black, one silver. That asshole father. Water skidded around the sink, collecting in puddles on the linoleum floor.

"Does Mom know you stole it?" Valerie's voice curled around the urns and into the bathroom.

"You tell me, Val. Have you talked to her?" Darrell hadn't seen their mother since their father went into the hospital. That was in January; it was April now. "How could she know?"

Val didn't say anything, and then she said, "We stopped by your apartment building last week."

"And what do I care if she knows? She won't do anything about it. Like when Dad was alive."

Darrell sat down on the bed. His slanky limbs felt awkward next to his sister's long and controlled curves. He ran his fingers through his hair and his curls were thick and unruly. Valerie patted Darrell's wrist. His shirtsleeve was damp.

"We missed you at the funeral," she said.

"You're just saying that."

She rolled her eyes and set the cigarette between her lips. From the purse at her feet she fished out a book of matches and lit the cigarette. Not again. She exhaled a thin stream of smoke, craning her neck away from her brother. Darrell winced.

"I wish you'd stop with that," he said.

"Yeah, you and Claude," she said.

"Only sensible thought he's had."

"Oh fuck off, Darrell." She twisted her body and reached for an ashtray on the nightstand. "That's why no one likes you, you know." Val tapped the ash off the end of her cigarette.

* * * *

Their father used to smoke; that's where Valerie got it from. Darrell never picked it up, although the habit seemed mildly appealing — like Humphrey Bogart, a man's man — but it was a matter of principle, and Darrell couldn't stand it when his sister smoked. It was the same thing with alcohol, although Valerie never touched the stuff either. The only taste Darrell had had was sips from their father's bourbon, and that was a long time ago.

There were always bottles lying around the house when Darrell was young, and his mother had begged his father to stash them where the children couldn't reach. Darrell's father didn't seem to care. He settled down in his brown and orange smoking chair on the weekend, cupped a round glass in his palm, and held the bottle on his leg. His father refilled the glass when it was empty.

Darrell sat on the floor next to his father while his father watched college football. Darrell watched him drink the gold liquid until there was just a drop left, and when his mother was in the other room, his father leaned over and handed him

the glass.

"Go ahead, junior," he said. "Take a sip."

With both hands Darrell held the glass. The smell burned up his nose and through the front of his face. He gulped it down, squeezing his eyes shut as hard as he could. He felt warm. When he opened his eyes, a player with a blue shirt and an orange helmet scored a touchdown.

His father leaned back in his smoking chair, rustled Darrell's hair, and said, "Atta boy. We'll make a man out of you yet." His hands were like ocean liners and his knuckles were hairy.

* * * *

Valerie dragged long on her cigarette, the end glowing orange and orange and then fading to ash. "So what am I doing here, Darrell?" she said.

"I thought maybe you'd want to see it." He picked up the silver urn and tossed it like a football from hand to hand. Then he spun it around and traced his fingers over the engraved name, the letters barely perceptible under his fingertips. "Thought maybe you'd want a piece of the bastard."

She changed the topic. "You know, I happen to like Claude."

"Oh, don't get all bent out of shape." She always got bent out of shape; if it wasn't Claude, then it was the next guy. "I just don't think he's good enough for my little sister."

"Spare me."

Darrell paused. "So, do you want to see it?"

"He's good to me."

"I said, do you want to see it?"

She stood up. "Darrell, you're thirty-four now. When will you just let it go?"

"Come on, Val." She had let it go a long time ago, and Darrell never understood why. But he needed their father more than she did.

"What about this other one?" She pointed at the black urn. "What're you doing with that? You have any idea who's in there?"

"That's part of the plan. I'm going to return that one," he said. "I'm bringing it back."

She grabbed the black urn and looked it over.

"Don't you think they'll figure it out then, the cops or whoever? Don't you think they'll put two and two together when this one magically reappears?"

Darrell sighed. "I'm not going to put it back where I found it. I'll hide it somewhere else and they'll find it themselves."

"What?"

"I won't put it back where it was. Make them think they misplaced it."

Val said, "I don't get it."

Of course she didn't. Claude must be rubbing off on her.

"Don't worry about it," Darrell said.

Darrell held his father's urn in front of his face. The urn was ordinary, plain pewter, stern and austere. A pair of thin black

bands circled the torso. Its silvery finish was dull but waxy, glistening in a way that begged to be cleaned. Even in death, Dad, you don't clean up. The name was arranged as if by typewriter, the imprinted letters rigid and official like a military dog tag: DARRELL WEEKES.

Darrell Jr. hated his name and had tried to change it legally when he was nineteen. His mother found the forms and cried and threw them in the kitchen trash. When she told his father, Darrell Jr. packed a bag and stayed with a friend for a few days until his father left for Jacksonville on business. When Darrell Sr. returned home a week later, no one mentioned anything about the name-changing.

With the urn between his knees, Darrell used both hands to unscrew the top. The lid was stubborn, not meant to be opened. Underneath, it was dark and difficult to see where the walls of the urn stopped and the ashes began. Darrell swirled the urn like a glass of bourbon.

"What're you doing now?" said Valerie.

Darrell licked the tip of his finger and poked into the opening, dabbing the ashes; he had to reach farther than he anticipated. When he pulled his hand out, his fingertip was coated with a gray residue. Darrell blew the ashes into the air and wiped his finger clean. Then he picked up the urn. He held it close to his mouth and spit inside.

* * * *

Whenever Darrell tagged along with his father in the station wagon, to the barbershop or the hardware store or the bar for the big rivalry games, Darrell's father had always let him ride up front, even though his mother insisted he was too young for that. They'd pull out of the driveway with Darrell in the back, his nose pressed against the window, waving goodbye to his mother, and then when they'd get down the block, his father would say, "Come on up, Junior," and Darrell climbed over the bench into the front seat.

"Can I open the window, Dad?"

"Sure, go ahead," his father said, and Darrell wound the handle in a circle with both hands. He leaned out and his hair flopped back in the wind.

The faster his dad drove, the more Darrell had to squint his eyes. Every time they went a little bit faster, Darrell turned and smiled at his dad and his dad smiled back and then went faster more. Bits and pieces flew into Darrell's face, bugs and other things. When he couldn't take it any longer, Darrell turned his head to face the rear of the car. He worked over some saliva in his mouth and spit it out, seeing how far he could reach, but dribbling a bit on his chin. Then he put his whole body into it, leaning back into the car and wishing the spit around and he nearly lunged out the window on his release.

"Junior, you get back in here," his Dad roared over the wind.

"C'mon, Dad."

"You get in here now, kid, or else I'll make you. You get any spit on this car, we're not going anywhere until you're done wiping it all off."

Darrell slinked back into his seat. His father then slammed on the brakes and Darrell was catapulted into the dash.

"See?" his father said. "Your head would've been knocked right out that window. Now sit up and put on your damn seatbelt."

* * * *

Darrell and Valerie waited until dark and shuffled into Valerie's sedan in the motel parking lot. It was a mild night and the air was dense. Darrell sat in the passenger seat with their father at his feet and the black urn on his lap. They drove west towards Sarasota.

"What are you going to do with the ashes?" Valerie said.

"I told you. I'm hiding the urn somewhere in the crematorium. No one will know the difference." They passed palm trees on the highway.

"No, I mean with Dad."

He looked down at his feet. "Haven't figured that out yet." He'll get his, though, one way or another.

It was almost eleven when they reached the crematorium on 17th. Darrell told his sister to pull into the lot across the street, and she parked in the shadow of a four-story office building. A handful of streetlamps lit patches of the pavement. Valerie's car was the only one in the lot.

"I'll be in and out," Darrell said. "Leave the car running, but keep your lights off."

He crossed 17th, carrying the black urn in a duffel bag. The entire block was quiet, offices and businesses closed until morning. In the distance he heard the gulf. Only a few people strolled down the street. He clutched the bag at his side, feeling for the urn, keeping it upright.

* * * *

When Darrell was twenty-eight, his mother had taken him aside and sat him down at the kitchen table. It was a few days before Christmas and his mother seemed worn out, as she always seemed to be around Christmastime.

"Darrell, honey" she said, "I've got to tell you something." Darrell played with his car keys and wanted to go back to his apartment.

His mother took a deep breath. "Years ago, shortly after your father and I got married," she said, "I was pregnant. With my first child."

Darrell slid a key off the ring and tapped it against the table.

"Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to have children, but when your father and I were dating, he said he didn't want any. I guess I changed his tune, though. It wasn't too long after the wedding, then. A year or two before you, and four or five before Val came along."

Darrell stopped tapping. The child she was talking about was not him.

"I found out around this time of year. Your father and I had been trying, so it came as a relief when it happened, at least for me. But he was away on business. I wanted to call and tell him, but I didn't know where he was staying, I didn't have a phone number to call. He was in Jacksonville somewhere, I knew that, but he never stayed at the same hotel. He liked to switch it up since he was there so often.

"So, I waited until he got back, a week later. I wanted it to be special. Our first child. I made a fancy dinner and put on my good dress. When he walked in the house, he went straight for his smoking chair; he didn't even take off his trench coat. I asked him how his trip was. He didn't want to talk about it. He never wanted to talk about work, but that job took everything out of him. I told him I made a special dinner, but he said he ate in the car. He said he had told me not to wait up for him when he left the week before, that's what he said, and he smoked his cigarette with the ashtray in his lap. When he finished, he looked up and told me how pretty I looked. And I should have told him right then and there; I don't know why I didn't. Because later that night, well, later that night your father and I got into an argument. God knows about what. Probably about work. But he ended up hitting me. We were at the top of the stairs and he hit me, right across the cheek, just once, with the back of his hand. And I know he didn't mean for it, but I fell. Down the stairs. Of course he rushed down after me. He helped me up. He said he was sorry. A black-and-blue mark had already started to come up, right above my hip. He rubbed it with his hand and got the icepack from the freezer and put me in bed. He said he was sorry. When I woke in the morning, the bruise had swollen to the size of an orange. Then a week or two later, I had the miscarriage." She paused and raised a hand to her mouth. "I never told your father about any of it."

When she was done, she made Darrell promise not to say anything. Darrell slid his key back onto the ring. He wondered if the baby had been a boy.

* * * *

Behind the crematorium, Darrell descended the cellar steps. He was nervous now; maybe this time there'd be someone waiting for him; maybe the crematorium hired a night watchman after what had happened the other night. The door at the bottom of the staircase was a simple wooden door with four glass panes, although a sheet of cardboard now covered

one of them. Darrell lifted the cardboard, reached inside, and unlocked the door.

In the cellar were two massive furnaces with open mouths and long sliding tables like tongues. The room reeked of fresh ash and burnt flesh, of incinerated bone. Darrell pictured the crematorium staff heaving his father's body headfirst into the furnace. He didn't even have to close his eyes it was so dark.

Darrell found the basement stairs. He felt his way to the top, and when he reached ground level, he crouched below the window ledges. He crept past bookcases and desks. When his eyes adjusted, Darrell could make out the shape of the ceiling-high storage unit that held the urns. Dozens of them stood in neatly arranged rows, each one with a nametag.

Taking the urn from his bag, Darrell strained to read the inscription: MANUEL VELÁZQUEZ. Dad, if only you had a grave to roll in. He always complained about those Cubans taking over Florida. There were a few empty spaces in the armoire, and Darrell found one on the bottom shelf and put the urn there, towards the back, on top of an empty tag. He made sure not to disturb the other urns. Everything according to plan.

Satisfied, Darrell wandered around the office. Out of sight from any windows, he sat down in a plush desk chair and rolled back and forth along the wood-paneled floor. The floor creaked. As far as Darrell could tell, the desk was organized except for a few loose papers, pens, and rubber bands. Two framed photographs were the only personal items. Darrell held one close to his face. It was a picture of a man on a dock, whom Darrell presumed to be the owner of the desk; the man was holding a very large fish.

In one of the desk drawers, Darrell found a small bottle of bourbon. It wasn't his father's brand. Once, when Darrell was a kid, his father had come home from work already reeking of the stuff. Darrell ran up for a hug and he smelled it, that same smell that burned his nose and the front of his face. Darrell then snuck around the house and hid the bottles. Later in the night, he and his sister listened from their bedroom to slamming doors and stomping feet. They stared at the walls until the noises stopped. Valerie thought she heard their mother crying, but Darrell insisted she was laughing because that's what moms and dads do, they laugh.

* * * *

Darrell sat in the dark. He didn't move; he barely blinked. How did Dad find those bottles, every time? Darrell's fingers wrapped around the bottle's neck. He thought maybe his mind was playing tricks; he heard footsteps. But the sounds grew louder, up the stairs. He thought of his sister, but the steps were heavy. Panicked, he slid under the desk, pulling the chair close. He clutched the bottle and was conscious of his breathing, in through his mouth and out through his nose.

Between the desk and the floor, Darrell saw shadows moving but there were no definite forms, just shapes. He saw the vague outline of his duffel bag at the foot of the armoire. Darrell held his breath, held it as hard as he could. The steps trounced around the room, a few feet in one direction, then another. They circled around Darrell. The bottle hit the floor; the sound was deafening, and the chair was pulled from the desk.

"Oh, there you are." Darrell recognized the voice, exhaled.

"Jesus, Claude, why don't you fucking call out or something," Darrell said, scrambling to his feet. "You scared me half to death."

Claude stood a few feet in front of Darrell, but Darrell could barely see him.

"Val called me," Claude boomed.

"Be quiet."

He lowered his voice. "She told me what was going on. Said you were in here too long. She wanted me to get you."

"You should've called out," Darrell said. "I was hiding under the desk, for chrissake."

"I didn't know."

"Yeah, yeah."

Darrell picked up the bourbon and put it back in the desk drawer. His eyes adjusted and Claude's features came to light: his broad flat nose, that rounded chin, and those bulky hands. In the dark, those hands were as big as Dad's.

"What you have against your old man, anyway?"

"I don't want to get into it, Claude."

Claude.

"Well, what are you going to do with the ashes?"

Enough with the questions. "C'mon, Claude, let's get out of here," Darrell said. "Val's waiting."

* * * *

Darrell woke to the ringing of the motel phone. He rolled in bed and glanced at the alarm clock.

"Hello?"

"Darrell, it's me."

"Val? It's early."

"She knows."

"What?"

"I'm coming to the motel."

Darrell put down the phone and sat up. He rubbed his eyes and checked the clock again, and then his wristwatch. On top of the television was the silver urn. He pulled the sheets over his head.

It wasn't long before Darrell woke a second time, this time to a knock at the door. He had no idea who it could be, but then vaguely remembered a conversation with his sister.

Darrell opened the door and Valerie walked in. She was quiet.

"So?" Darrell said.

"Mom knows," Val said.

"What do you mean Mom knows?"

"I mean she knows, Darrell. She knows you broke in, she knows you stole Dad's urn, and she knows you've got it now."

Darrell coaxed his legs into a pair of jeans. "How does she know all this? You didn't tell her, did you?"

"She kind of tricked Claude."

"Oh, Jesus."

"Darrell."

He shook his head.

"Look," Val said, "the point is she knows. So why don't you just come on home and give it back to her?"

Darrell set his hand on top of the urn. He yawned. His sister took out a cigarette and a book of matches. She tossed the dead match on the floor.

"Val, I'm not bringing the ashes back. At least not yet."

She sighed and blew smoke.

"Mom doesn't know where I'm staying," he said, "does she?"

"She has no idea. But she knows I've been in touch with you, and if she asks me, I may just tell her."

"Oh, come on."

"I won't lie to her."

There was a pause. "What are you doing with it, anyway?" Valerie said. She looked around the room for the ashtray.

Darrell rubbed his temples.

"I can't just let this go," he said.

"It's not your fight, Dar."

Darrell didn't say anything.

"I'm leaving," she said. "I told you, I'm not going to lie to her, not five days after the funeral." She buried her cigarette in the ashtray.

* * * *

Darrell sat on the toilet with the lid down, his elbows propped on his knees, his chin resting in his palms. The silver urn was at his feet, its lid unscrewed. He stayed like this for an hour, not moving. He tried to spit inside the urn, letting the spit drip from his lower lip, but mostly missed his target. Gobs of saliva clung to the urn, sliding down to the floor. When he hit his target straight on, the spit disappeared into the black hole, a soft thud. Sometimes, if the spit was big enough, a tiny gray cloud poofed from the urn.

He wondered what his mother would do and imagined her bursting into the bathroom, finding him hocking loogies into his father's ashes. He'd invite her to join him, and they'd spend the rest of the day filling the urn with spit.

When Darrell stood up, it was almost four and his mouth was dry. He replaced the urn's cap and wiped the sides with a tissue. Darrell left the motel room with the ashes.

He found his car and put the urn on the passenger side floor. Then he drove west. He looked at the road and at the urn and back at the road again. Stopped at a red light, Darrell scooped up the urn and placed it on the seat next to him. He fastened the seatbelt around the urn.

"You know, I can't stand bourbon," he said.

Darrell opened the window and the wind beat against his face.

Then he noticed a matchbook pinned underneath the windshield wiper. Darrell pulled to the side of the road. It was dark and still. Power lines hummed between palm trees. Darrell grabbed the matchbook. He flipped it open; there were still a few matches attached. On the inside cover was a note in black pen. "Mom doesn't really know about the urn. But we'd like you to come home anyway. —Val"

Darrell laid the matchbook on the dashboard. He removed the keys from the ignition and sat in the car with his father's urn held fast in the seat.

"Dad," he said.

"Dad, I need to—" He stopped.

Page Marker

Eileen Reynolds

Jenna shivers in her light coat and watches the fog curl around corners and thicken until nothing is more than an outline. When the number 30 pulls to a stop, she makes her way through the ghostly crowd and is soon seated just across from and behind the exit door.

She removes a book from her bag before tucking the bag between body and window, and then relaxes and opens the book to a dog-eared page marker, which she unfolds. The story is about a family reunion on a lake in Wisconsin; more specifically, about the 14-year-old narrator who would prefer to be almost anywhere other than at a family reunion on a lake in Wisconsin. He takes a rowboat out, lines the bottom with its square plastic pillows, and promptly falls asleep in the intense afternoon sunlight. It's a big lake and the boat has drifted.

The bus lurches forward and Jenna relaxes into the push/pull rhythm. As they make their way through Chinatown, the bus fills and empties quickly as Jenna listens to the sounds of Mandarin and Cantonese in their endless tonal variations. She used to be annoyed by all of this gibbering while she was trying to read, and then one day found herself distracted by the silence that followed their departure from Chinatown. The sounds had turned from speech to music and each day when the music is gone, she experiences a moment of grief.

She returns to her book in the renewed silence. The boy has just woken up. He looks around, trying not to panic; every dock looks like every other dock and every lawn like every other lawn. He's realizing how big the lake really is and how much time he has, before it gets dark, to find the right dock, the right family, to return to.

The bus is nearly empty now. As they pull away from the curb, the driver hits the brakes hard and heads snap back. The doors open and a man slowly climbs the steps. He's wearing a long khaki green coat and ancient fingerless gloves, his hair and beard are gray. His coat and the careful way he drops his coins in the slot remind her of something, and as she tries to decide what it is, he happens to glance back and catch her gaze. She immediately lowers her eyes and pretends to read, but she can't get past the sentence she's on, the words have no meaning. She's focused instead on the heavy scraping steps of the man in the green coat making his way down the aisle towards her, and the memory that's trying to surface. The footsteps stop and she knows that he's standing next to her seat waiting for her to look up at him. She waits a minute to see if he'll go away.

He doesn't.

She looks at him.

"Could I sit here?" He asks in a deep clear voice. She looks at the other passengers, who immediately look away and at all the empty seats around them.

"There are a lot of empty seats, you're right, but I'd rather not sit alone, if it isn't too much trouble," he says.

And then something connects. He reminds her of Uncle Stanley.

Jenna and her parents lived in a small quiet bungalow on a small quiet street in a small quiet suburb; and then, the summer she turned nine, her Uncle Stanley came to live with them.

He didn't act like other grown-ups. There was something deferential about the way he behaved; he sat sideways in chairs, as though he were trying to avoid using the whole chair. He could walk on his hands and juggle five balls at once. That summer he taught her how to ride a bicycle with no hands and how to play poker. Mostly though, they played checkers. Jenna's stomach feels hollow. She hasn't thought of Stanley in years and doesn't particularly want to think about him

now. The bus starts to move and the man in the green coat, who is awaiting her decision, has to grab the rail of the seat in front of her. Jenna startles and moves her jacket to her lap. The man lowers himself slowly into the seat next to hers. She smiles at him briefly and returns to her book, waiting for the smell to hit her. But it doesn't; the man doesn't smell like anything. He makes no attempt at further communication and sits quietly while she reads. From the edge of her vision, she sees his left hand abruptly dart out in front of him, and watches him guide it back with his right. He holds his hands tightly in his lap while they engage in a battle for dominance. She turns to look at him. His forehead is lined with beads of sweat. Both hands suddenly jump as one and he forces them back to his lap.

He tries to smile, but his eyes fill up. "I can't help it. It just happens," he says.

She nods. She would like to be sympathetic and to some degree she is, it must be awful to have to live like that. On the other hand, she's reading and doesn't want to spend the next thirty minutes listening to his life story. She looks up from his hands to his face, smiles, and turns back to her book.

The boy is still lost on the lake. He's rowed himself close to shore, but nothing looks familiar. The docks and back lawns he passes are crowded with people who could be his relatives, but aren't. Some wave at him from where they're sitting, paddling their feet back and forth in the cool water below. He waves back and rows to the next house and then the next and then the one after that. It will be dark soon and then the bugs will come out. He wonders what will happen to him. He floats from pier to pier watching other families carry out their summer rituals.

The bus stops again and the driver gets off to reattach the electric cable to the cable line. Unintentionally, Jenna looks at the man next to her. Behind the gray hair and the disheveled appearance are clear green eyes. He isn't an alcoholic, no broken blood vessels, no bulbous red nose. His face has a quiet dignity like the faces on coins. The careful, almost apologetic way he has of holding himself is what, she now realizes, reminds her of Uncle Stanley.

The thing about Uncle Stanley was that he could play checkers all day, unlike other grown-ups who would get tired after a few games. On an afternoon in July, after Jenna had just won a game, he stood up and took off his pants. Then he sat back down in lime green boxer shorts and continued playing.

Uncle Stanley had purple underwear and polka dotted underwear and a pair that had Bugs Bunny all over them. Part of her was always curious about what kind of underwear he was wearing. This became their new pattern. If Jenna won, Uncle Stanley took off his pants. It made her feel guilty and powerful at the same time. She never told anyone.

The man is watching her study him. She drops her eyes.

"You remind me of someone," she says quietly.

"Someone good or someone bad?" he asks.

"I don't know."

One day that summer she was coasting downhill and her jeans got caught in the spokes of her bike. The front of the bike stopped but the back didn't. She got thrown over the handlebars and hit the ground hard. Her bicycle skittered to the far curb. She waited for a concerned parent to come running out of their house and carry her to safety, but nothing happened. No cars drove by. No faces appeared at windows. Everything remained exactly as it was, and she limped slowly and painfully home. Her parents were at a barbeque down the street and she didn't think she could limp that far.

But as soon as she reached home, Stanley ran outside, scooped her up, and carried her into the house. He set her down on the washing machine. Then he cleaned her scraped knee with rubbing alcohol, which is all they had in the house. She didn't make a sound, but tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes. When he was finished, he picked her up under the arms and set her back on the floor. Then he put his hands together in prayer, held them to his chest, and bowed once. Stanley left at the end of the summer and she never saw him again.

"Did this person hurt you?" the man who isn't Stanley asks.

Jenna slowly shakes her head

"That's good, I'm glad," he says.

She returns to her book. She doesn't want to talk to this stranger anymore. The boy on the lake is scared. He isn't going to find his family before dark and there is now a steady fog of mosquitoes floating around the boat, around the only warm-

blooded creature left on the lake. He has to get off the water. He needs help, but has no idea how to ask for it.

Jenna looks out the window. They're nearing her stop. She flips ahead several pages; she's less than halfway through the story and this makes her think that something bad is going to happen to the boy. She returns to the page she was on and bends the corner down.

"You're a page marker. I haven't been able to do that since I was about five," the man says.

Jenna smiles tentatively.

"My father was a college professor with a great reverence for books. If we damaged a book, any book, he would deduct money from our allowance until he could replace it with a new copy," the man says. "So our house was full of books that appeared never to have been read."

Jenna looks at the man's face and pictures a library of pristine, untouched books, and a palpable overbearing presence somewhere in the background. She holds her book out to him. He hesitates, but she smiles at him and nods. He takes it from her very gently, opens it towards the middle and very carefully and deliberately turns down the corner of the page and hands it back, but she shakes her head. When she reaches the stairwell, the man speaks to her again.

"Don't you want to know how it ends?" he asks.

"Not really," she says and reaches up to pull the cord for her stop.

Killing Summer

Amy Jackson

The dusty day holds dandelion seeds in the air. White helicopters, I call them. Brief clouds remain stagnant as though resting before a journey and the heat makes it hard to breathe. I wish to be smaller, insect small. I'd hug the spines of those helicopters and fly away from here. Over the mountains. Away.

I pass between rows of insect bitten lettuce and the stretch of sunflowers the neighbours whisper about and say don't look right in such a horizontal garden; the flowers' faded black faces pecked at by birds. My younger sister Laura follows, hopping over lines of wilting vegetables as grasshoppers land on her skin. "They're popping like popcorn," she says. s

We scurry toward the raspberries planted against Father's workshop, carefully avoiding the perpendicular fence where pinesap has fallen like honey on the white boards. Plucking away, we examine the raspberries for white worms then squash the berries against the roofs of our mouths with our tongues, the pips getting caught in our teeth. She smiles and black dots gather at the edge of her gums. Mine too. But more collect in the gap between her two front teeth, and in the pit where her tooth has just fallen out.

At lunch, Mum, dressed in those pants I despise, the ones that just cover her knee, comes to help clean the algae and cat poop from the plastic pool. "It's too hot for you to be running around," she says. "Make sure you don't get burnt. Try and stay in the shade." But there isn't any shade. The sun doesn't make shadows at this hour.

Hours pass. Slowly the poplar trees are mirrored in black along the ground, extended and stretched. We lounge in the water. Our toes and fingers are wrinkled when Father's truck rumbles to a stop in the carport under the veranda. He goes inside, slamming the screen door. Screen doors always slam it isn't a big deal.

Laura's toes touch mine in the water and I kick her back onto her half. She knows not to cross the line. "You know," I start, "sharks can appear in pools like this. My friend, Georgy, well that's how she lost her arm. Just last summer too. A pool like this."

Laura flings her arms and leaps from the pool. "I ain't getting no limbs eaten off," she cries. Then she really cries. "Get out. Please. I'm going to tell, if you don't get out."

"I'm just joking. Don't be so stupid. Georgy lost her arm from a bear attack," I lie. Georgy really had lost her arm because of some disease that had made her fingers black real fast. Our teacher said Georgy was lucky to be alive.

Laura splashes me, but I am ten and she is six and I always seem to win; my hands are larger and cup more water.

"Caitlin, Laura, come up here and set the table," Mum calls from the balcony. The tremble in her voice isn't because of the broken refrigerator like she pretends, the one leaking onto the floor, but because of Father.

He's barbecuing tonight. Blue smoke curls at the upper lip of the veranda roof and we smell the char from the steaks filtering down to the pool. Suddenly I'm starving and clustered strings of damp hair whip my back as I race Laura up the veranda stairs. My footprints sizzle on the sunned linoleum and my bathing suit is tight around the middle, slightly distorting the heart print. The scent of the hops from Father's beer is strong and I hear Mum cooking potatoes and corn in the kitchen through the screen door. Her pots are rattling on the stovetop, the water bubbling over onto the elements.

"Good girls," Mum says, when we take out the plates and cutlery. Laura tries to give herself the sharpest knife but I steal it back, and put it beside my favourite plate, the one with the etched flowers in the middle.

A hummingbird sucks red nectar from the feeder hanging from above as we wait. I remember last month when Father

and his work buddies were in the kitchen before they set off into the bush to go hunting. He had taken a two-litre of fruit punch from the fridge and drank it in the kitchen, the candy red juice making waves down his throat as he gulped it straight from the jug. Mum came in just before he had finished and started to laugh. It was homemade hummingbird juice, she said: one part sugar, two parts water and a bit of red food colouring. Everyone laughed except Father. His buddies tucked their hands in their armpits, waving their elbows about and hummed. Father says we aren't going to the Christmas work party this year.

Now in the distance, the shadows on the mountains lining the subdivision slide down the pines, as though the green trees are melting them like ice cream. I notice bees busy sucking the remains pooled in the tin ledge around his beer can. My father is allergic to bees.

"Sit down and tell me if you want barbeque sauce," he slurs, waving his hand over his can before raising it to his lips. The heat effects his speech, or he started drinking at work; I can't tell which, but it doesn't matter. Soon I'll be back in the water, away from the house, away from the shadows.

All four of us sit at the picnic table he had built himself. It cost twice as much as the one in the catalogue but he always tries to prove his abilities. He built it after he had taken our black lab, Max, down to the river and shot it in the head, because it hadn't loved him. It wasn't the dog's fault. He was chained to the clothesline and had worn a dirt path into the grass where he ran back and forth, barking at invisible things. Even now from my bedroom window, a faint brown line refuses to turn green despite the chicken manure and seed my father puts on it.

My bottom pinches as it slides between the cracking paint on the wood plank seat. Wincing, I eat my meal, eager to get back to the water. I excuse myself, pick up my plate and take it to the kitchen.

"Grab me another while you're in there," he says, hacking his steak with a butter knife. Blood runs into his potatoes and stains them pink.

Reaching into the fridge, the cold clings to my skin, making it bumped and raised. Goosebumps are horrible, they remind me of the skin Mum tears off the chicken before she cooks it. I toss the beer can from one hand to the other like it's a hot potato until finally placing it on the corner of the table. He reaches out and grabs my arm. I feel an imprint forming under his grip but don't flinch.

"Where you going?"

"Swimming."

Mum puts down her knife and fork—the premature lines around her eyes and mouth are deep. She senses the weather change. I had seen it coming. Black and blue clouds draw nearer. It has an electrifying dry charge.

"Just let her go," Mum tries.

"But I brought ice cream home for dessert tonight," he says, the corners of his lips curling in a pout, his eyes brooding, tearing my insides apart like saltwater taffy.

"I'll have some later, thanks."

The atmosphere thickens like curdled cream. The sun hides behind tall pines and the sounds of lawn mowers, of screen doors slamming, cease. He chews his mouthful, looking at me like I am a repulsive growth, locking his eyes onto mine; those familiar drugged eyes. He places his elbows on the table, his every move calculated.

"You fat pig. You just want to have all the ice cream to yourself later on, don't you? You're disgusting."

Everything becomes mute, the numbness of my movement, the noise, all the noise; except the bees, buzzing, buzzing around his can, walking into the circular opening and disappearing into the half hollow tin. His fingers grip his drink. I watch him bring it to his mouth and swallow.

Just Married

Malena Watrous

After my wedding, I piled presents into my arms so that I'd only have to make one trip to the car. It was midnight, and I couldn't see the trunk as I fumbled for the latch. Nor could I see the red paint letters spelling, "Just Married," which transferred in reverse onto my white dress.

This seemed unlucky.

It wasn't until the next morning that I could see the car itself, covered in garish red drawings and slogans. Matt wanted to wash the car before our honeymoon, but I persuaded him that we should leave it decorated for the drive to Big Sur.

"Come on," I cajoled him. "We'll be able to speed the whole way. I mean, what kind of cop would pull over a pair of newlyweds?"

The cops policing the 4th of July drunk-driving checkpoint, as it turned out. They had trouble believing that newlyweds hadn't been drinking, and were unamused when I explained that I'd left the car decorated as a speeding strategy. We finally convinced them that we had been married (and sober) for almost twenty-four hours, and they advised us to stay that way.

The car was not a hit at the Lodge at Big Sur, a rustic motel in the middle of a state park, where the rooms had no televisions, telephones or clocks. "What time is it?" Matt kept asking me, not that it mattered. We spent a lot of time in our room. Hiding in our room. While the "Just Married" had been smudged by my wedding dress, the words "If you see it rockin' don't come knockin'" were still large and legible on the side of the car.

"What does that mean?" a little girl asked her mother, whose glare sent us back to San Francisco a day early.

On the ride home, the fog finally lifted and the sun baked the paint to a hard glaze. By the time we reached our apartment, the letters had turned the maroon of an old scab, and the vehicle looked less festive than scary.

On Valencia Street, a guy pulled Matt aside as he hoisted our suitcases from the car. "You must have just gotten back from Mexico," he said. Matt shook his head and the guy winked. "It's cool," he said. "I used to decorate my van to run shipments across the border. You figure, no way the cops will pull over a pair of newlyweds, right man?"

Matt found it troubling, the extent to which this drug-runner and I thought alike.

A week went by, and the paint acquired a topcoat of city grime. But with every passing day, I failed to see what difference another one would make. And there was always something more pressing on my schedule, like a conference with a student at a neighborhood cafe.

I'm not sure why I drove the four blocks to this café, or how I missed the Tow-Zone sign, but when I emerged from my conference the car was gone. "Green and red Honda?" the clerk at the city impound lot called on the intercom, laughing as I handed over a \$250 check.

It was time to take matters into my own hands. So I drove to the nearest car wash, an assembly-line operation on Van Ness. When I gave my keys to the attendant, she asked if I wanted the \$20 regular car wash or the \$60 detailing, which came with a hubcap shine and pineapple polish.

"I just want my car washed," I said.

Ten minutes later she returned my keys and my car, which looked exactly the same only wet. When I complained, she said that I should've paid the extra for the detailing. She also refused to let me pay the difference. So I pulled my car into the gas station on the side of the lot, grabbed a squeegee and started scrubbing. But no matter how hard I scrubbed, the red paint didn't even fade. I knew that this was a fitting punishment for laziness, but I still felt sorry for myself.

"Congratula..." people kept saying, stopping themselves at the sight of my tear-streaked face.

I knew what I looked like: a jilted bride, a character from a soap opera, if soap opera characters ever did anything as mundane as wash their cars. I might have enjoyed the drama, except that my scrubbing was still making no difference.

"Ma'am?" said a homeless guy pushing a shopping cart piled with junk. "You know, a little gasoline will get that right off." He pulled a greasy rag from his cart and rubbed the side of the car, smudging the paint in a way that seemed promising. "If you just put a few dollars on the pump," he said, "I'll have your car looking brand new in minutes. Easiest thing in the world."

Magic words to a lazy person's ears. I fed my credit card to the machine, gave him a ten for his troubles and watched as he aimed the nozzle at my car, painting it with iridescent streaks of gasoline. Within moments, the gas station attendants came running. "I wouldn't let him do that to your car," one of them called out.

"Just ignore them," the man advised me, as he smeared the paint around and around. "I was in the car wash business for years, before I fell out of luck."

I was beginning to see why. As he smeared the red paint around, my car looked as if it had been attacked by lipstick, sordid crimson streaks obscuring the windows.

"If you just put a few more dollars on the pump..." he said.

"It looks great," I lied, desperate to get away before he caused any more damage.

"Hey look," he said, "there's a nail stuck in your tire." He bent down and plucked it out. "Lucky I came along when I did!" he added. The hiss of air releasing was audible over my own gasp. Before I could speak, he grabbed a screwdriver from his shopping cart, followed by a jar of rubber cement. He dipped the screwdriver in the rubber cement, stuck it in the punctured tire, then lit the spot with a match.

Miraculously, the gas-soaked vehicle did not go up in flames. But as I drove away from the car wash, my car still covered in the words "Just Married," droopy hearts and vaguely obscene slogans, I fully expected my tire to collapse. Miraculously, it got me home.

One year later, I still haven't replaced it.

Lullaby

Barbara Jane Reyes

*After Juan Carlos Quintana's Juegitos de Guerra (American Lullaby Series) 2007
Pistolitas de Azúcar Exhibit, Galería de la Raza, San Francisco, May 11, 2007*

He is a freckled boy, a flaxen-haired crackerjack, a boatswain rosy-cheeked mopboy child. He's a crayon coloring book cartoon, forlorn ghost who's lost at sea. He is building a crippled empire. He's damaged but he's still trying to read the crossroad signs, deployed with ammo: here's a little game, a teensy weensy pistol, a pinch of salt in a great big ocean. He is lockshorn, and inside his head, he wears his father's brain. His victory medaled, easy chair safe, sweatervest safe and pomaded father. This pinch of stardust begetting the cosmos, his father is the stuff of stars.

He is caught in a web of war prison cells, where swept into festering garbage, heaps grade school rucksacks' adventure boy days, devil may care and feet swinging sunshine, brass buttoned drummer boy, bright stripey candy, secret toy surprise days. It wasn't supposed to happen this way, the angels of bloodshed descending. He covers his milk crusted eyes.

He's the man who's crawled on all fours onto the rush hour bus; he can't get up. He can't say where he needs to be let off. Somewhere. He's lost one stinky overworn sandal. He wears one threadbare sock on one callused foot. A fermented smell that clings to his hair in oily clumps and knots. He winces his destination, and no one can hear him wince. He remains on this bus 'til it reaches its end stop, and circles back around again. He rocks himself. He hums and lulls. This scene replays itself three, four times.

Before his toddler stumbling days, before he forgot how to walk, before the flowerbed dimple-kneed girls come feeling his biceps, he's naked, crutched, hollowed, swollen, and children in bonnets point up and up. They want to be him because he is their hero, of dime store comic book big briny deep, where sailorboys in unison singing sea songs, don boat paper hats, donald duck soft. Now he's a tangled weaving of blood, a painted shadow, seaman whose stardust filled head now rings with implosion. He crouches, falls backward, he's hot in the kill, with pistols of sugar, and tangerine flavored chemical dots that stick to the tongues of sugared skulls, sour milkspill into black drowning sea. His pomaded father weaves his frayed synapses, puppet and kite strings, rosary beads. He fashions these into a noose. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

He's a haunt, he's lost at sea. He builds an empire from his crippled bones and calcified wounds. He crawls city streets, he cannot uplift. Gravel and pebbles embed themselves there, in the skin of his knees and his once fleshy palms. There, where the angels of abscess and the angels of bloodclot hush him and bid him good fight, goodnight.

He dreams the warm blanket smell of his father, his Arlington Cemetery victory father. But some pauper's grave is where some one will dump the bones of his own strip mined body. His headstone blank, and even his children, who in a fleeting moment tenderness, wished to find him (this narcosis haze), they couldn't know where to search. He'd winced his name, and no one at County, and no one at the VA hears him wince. There's no one to savor his prewar glossies, he's yellowing at the edges and fading. Fading, he's falling fast asleep.

He dreams his soul's a rusted tin of rusted nails, blunted and bent, pulled from a building before this building is leveled to dust. His body, this building, does not remember construction, or function, or the sad tenants of its sad little rooms, or the stubborn melodies of no word lullabies these long dead tenants once sang to their long dead medaled, amputee children, clinging to vacated hallways' stagnant air and cobwebs of his parched, brittle veins. How much it hurts. Oh, how it hurts. But do not cry, for God is nigh. If you should die before your wake, your soul to slake, your day is done. The angels of breach sing you to sleep.

ANOTHER RAIN DREAM

Jennifer Chapis

directly down the barrel of my stare

one tusk of dream

errs into the next

couple kissing in a shady thicket

silver sky-spaces her silk lapel

the skull beneath his avid face

it's raining inside he's losing air fast—

birds unsettle the pear trees he offers his hand

corner of her ear like a baby bassinette

red-weather eros

we're

raining

I think we've just lived through it