The editors and staff of CutBank 33 & 34 are pleased to announce the winner of the 1989-90 Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award

Stephen Dobyns — "Walls to Put up, Walls to Take Down"
with honorable mentions to (in alphabetical order)
Henry Gerfen — "Communists"
Lowell Jaeger — "Confessions"
Judge: Robert Wrigley

A.B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award

Phil Condon — "Babyman"
with honorable mentions to (in alphabetical order)
Ann Cummins — "Raccoon"
Craig Miles Miller — "Islands"
Judge: Jon Jackson
CutBank 34

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## CutBank 34

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- Untitled
- Cover

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  - Walls to take Down
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NOTE: The art work featured in Steve Saroff’s cover photo on issue 33 was Aruina by Robert W. Harrison.
Walls to Put up,  
Walls to Take Down

The old mad house in Santiago stood tucked back behind the hospital on a side street to the cemetery, walls of cheap brick, cheap concrete through which the inmates had bored little holes, and walking past one could see dozens of cleft sticks with notes offered to the passers-by, some begging for money, others for help or food, some asking that word be sent to some friend or relative or lover who surely must be waiting just as they themselves had waited, all day holding their sticks as if fishing over a dry pond, the water seeped away, leaving several tires, a cat skeleton tied to a brick, a rusted car door. I remembered all this in a hotel bar in Belgrade when a whore was telling me, "My name is Dragonova but I prefer to be called Lolita." Lolita the promise, Dragonova the reality, a beautiful girl hoping to become a hairdresser, but no matter how much I wanted her flesh, to cup her breasts, nuzzle my nose in her belly, it was her flesh that stood between us and what I wanted, stood between us like the wall of the madhouse. "A little pop," a friend said, "you should have taken her upstairs for a little pop." But what could we really do? She might charitably moan.

I might have my little flash of light, a meal after which one still feels hungry. The thing is that nobody ever went down that street in Santiago. It was a side street. But it didn’t matter, it was the only street they had. Sometimes with my wife, if we haven’t been quarreling, it feels like we are sitting together without skin, a large basket of confused body parts. "In this mood," as Wordsworth
remarked, "successful composition generally begins."
It's as if I could reach her skin from the inside,
burrowing outward instead of poking at the surface
like a dowser looking for water. Flaubert in Egypt

had a wonderful whore, Kuchuk Hanem, who he swore
would remember him more than all the others.
"Toward the end," he wrote, "there was something
sad and loving about the way we touched."

Later he realized his self-deception. "This
particular tourist who was vouchsafed the honors
of her couch has vanished from her memory like
all the others." Also, "As for physical pleasure,
it must be slight, since the famous button, the seat
of such pleasure, is snipped off at an early age." And he concludes, "Traveling makes one modest--
you see what a tiny spot you inhabit in the world."

And as a postscript: "I must tell you, my dear sir,
that I picked up in Beirut (I discovered them in Rhodes,
land of the dragon) seven chancregs. . . Each night
and morning I bandage my poor prick." Recently,
in Santiago I went searching for this madhouse
and it was gone, torn down, and only a section
of wall remained through which the inmates
had pushed their sticks. A hot and smoggy day,

the streets crowded with buses, cabs. Think of
all those people in transit--all those of destinations
with one single destination waiting a little further
beyond. The mental patients, more like prisoners,
had been transferred. Or perhaps with modern medicine
they had been released and had no need to ask
for anything, plead or beg for anything, as they
proceeded in speedy transition from one less

than perfect place to the next. Do you remember
how Ford Madox Ford wrote that you marry a person
to finish a conversation with her? And I also
like how that summons up that somewhat outdated
legal expression for illicit fucking: criminal
conversation, or crim con as they said in the courts.
Many times my wife and I speak only to complain
and I am the bag of stones she wears around her neck,
but other times, fewer times, we are engaged in that
long conversation, the one we stay together for,
the one we always hope for, where the flesh seems
to disappear and the parts get all jumbled together
as in a cannibal’s stew, even if she sits in one chair
and I sit in another. The whore in Belgrade knew
about one hundred words in English and half were
the specialty words of her profession. I bought her
a Coke. She asked why I was in Belgrade. In explanation
I showed her the book of my poems translated into
her language. She read a few, decided she wanted it,
asked for it, asked me to sign it, then carried it
off to her next customer, beautiful skimpily dressed
girl with a face of shadow and a book of poems.
Oh, Dragonova/Lolita sleep with it under your pillow
just once. Those inmates in Santiago could see nothing,
hear nothing. All they had were those holes and their
messages—help me, they put me here by mistake—
and years of waiting until the whole place was
torn down. And I asked my wife who knew the city,
Didn’t you ever read the messages? And she said,
No one ever stopped. Some friends had told her what
the bits of paper said. At the end of the street
stood the huge granite gates of the cemetery, like
the gates of a municipal museum but bigger, a city
of corpses with its ghettos and rich neighborhoods,
rows of fancy houses although no one asks to borrow
a cup of sugar. The trouble with Belgrade, the promise
of Lolita and the actuality of Dragonova, her mad
house walls and my mad house walls rubbing crazily
together, what if I grew to like it? It makes me
remember an old Texan in Amsterdam in 1959—
for us teenagers the lovely Dutch whores charged two dollars and seventy cents if any of us managed to dredge up the nerve, for this Texan they charged twenty-seven dollars and a lot of laughter. Still he would stagger out each evening, his guts hurt, kidneys hurt, his prick was wobbly and battered as he kept banging himself against the hard Dutch flesh. Sometimes around midnight I would find him in a bar too depressed even to speak. He had children somewhere, a divorced wife. What beauty gives us is the hope of intimacy. Fashion and advertising, the whole package, all promise a certain closeness, an occasion when the walls might disappear, one inmate rubbing his belly against another belly of his choosing, or which has chosen him, the long conversation, the erasure of isolation, as if we might all be piled together like puppies in a pet shop window, a tangle of extremities and no barriers anyplace, hardly any need to speak, each thought anticipated and responded to, no concern for the future, no regret for the past, just this complete touching, this discourse with all the barriers gone, and that’s the joke, right? Who put the walls up in the first place, who made them indestructible and now we want them gone? I told my wife, can you take me to that street? So we drove through Santiago. Smog so dense our eyes burned, but all we found were just fragments of brick walls with little holes bored through them, thick walls, nearly two feet of boring and digging, then the waiting, occasionally jiggling the stick to show someone was there, and we knew without speaking they hadn’t been released, weren’t out on the street, but that somewhere were new walls of red brick or concrete, and on one side someone was trying to scratch his way through with a pin to make a hole
big enough for a little note, a little request,
and on the other side the traffic, the honking,
air so thick with fumes it wipes out the mountains,
leaving just the city, its constant jittery motion.

Stephen Dobyns
The second morning after Mark Bowman leaves on a three-day camping trip, Linda Bowman goes downstairs to feed the cats, and she decides to feed them inside instead of out because it’s cold, so she opens the patio door and lets them in. They have four cats: Clouseau, McCavity, Sultana, The Noot.

The cats start eating, Linda’s making coffee. When she turns around, she sees two cats eating out of the same dish. Then she notices that there are not four, but five cats in the house. She’s half-way across the floor to shoo one out when she sees that this morning there are four cats and one raccoon in her kitchen. She stops because she’s barefoot. The raccoon shares Clouseau’s food.

Linda heads for the stairs thinking, Mark, you better come down here. This is instinct. A raccoon in the kitchen would not normally be her department. But Mark’s in the mountains, and here she is.

It appears to be your typical raccoon: the mask, fur, like somebody’s hat, some vermin ridden hat. Little rodent feet, sharp little toenails—teeth. The raccoon licks Clouseau’s food in a kind of panic, and its tail thumps the kitchen floor. Clouseau watches. Today, Clouseau doesn’t look much interested in food. There won’t be more, cat. By noon you’ll reconsider.

Linda decides to go upstairs and put her shoes on while the raccoon eats. The raccoon is not likely to notice sudden movements while it’s eating. Then again, you don’t want to let a thing like this out of your sight because a wild animal would head for cover the minute you turn your back. You don’t find it for a week—then only by the smell. And, it’s going after that food like it doesn’t want to be disturbed— The raccoon stops eating. There’s still half a bowl of cat food. It sits on its haunches, looks around her kitchen.

The raccoon has a twisted snout. It does. The snout ebbs to the left, and she believes that’s a little scratch just under the right eye, a little blood-dotted scratch in the shape of a smile. The raccoon looks around, and it’s got this stuffed expression—its jowls work like they’re trying to digest the tuna in its stomach. A raccoon should like tuna. A raccoon fishes. This should not be that much of a surprise, but the raccoon’s lost interest in the food. It glances at Clouseau, at Linda’s feet. She thinks it might throw up.

Her cats trust her about food. Clouseau trusts her.

And this morning, Clouseau looks like she trusts this raccoon. Clouseau is a trusting cat. Clouseau is forgetting herself. She neither eats nor grooms nor purrs, but watches.
Your normal raccoon is probably twice as big as your normal cat. Clouseau is the smallest of her cats. This raccoon appears to be of normal size which makes him maybe two and one-quarter times bigger than Clouseau, a lion next to Clouseau, and Clouseau looks stoned—that glassy, green, a little yellow around the sockets, unblinking stare of a stoned cat. She looks a little out of whack this morning.

Considering what Linda heard last night, she’s not surprised. It could only have been Clouseau. Linda thought she was still too young. Mark and Linda went through several litters before they fixed the older cats, and Mark used to pretend he could distinguish between their nocturnal bleatings. "That’s McCavity," he’d say. Two a.m., and Mark’s whispering, "That’s a female satisfied." McCavity was the worst, the way she’d let any old thing come sniffing around.

"Ninety-nine percent is smell," Mark likes to say.
"Don’t wash," he’d say. Many days during the first few years of their marriage, after her morning run, Linda’d be soaked with sweat, in the kitchen gulping water, and he’s standing in the doorway, staring with that hollow-eyed look. "Don’t wash."
"Mark, I stink."
"Ninety-nine percent is smell." According to Mark, when Napoleon came home to Josephine, three days before he arrived, he sent a carrier with a note that read: Home in three days; don’t wash. Linda should remind him that Napoleon died of syphilis and he didn’t get it from Josephine, but Mark knows that. Linda thinks he didn’t go camping alone.
"Who camps alone?" she’d asked.
"It’s just an experiment," he said.
"An experiment?"
"It’s just something I want to try."

He’s never camped alone. He’s camped with their son, David. He’s camped and fished with his father. He’s camped and fished with her father. And with her. On their honeymoon, and for years after that. Linda likes to camp. But she didn’t say that to Mark. She stood in the garage and watched him take down gear from hooks on the wall. She leaned against the car, just noticing what an acrobat her husband was. How he trotted around the cramped garage, walking through the maybe eighteen inches of space between her and the wall without turning sideways. It was marvelous how he did that, and not even once brush her clothes.

She didn’t remind him that she liked to camp. She asked him if she could pick up anything at the store for him. He said no, he’d stop on his way out of town.

Stop where? Mark’s not a loner. He’s a social animal. She’d lay money he went with Andrea Foster. She’s a free woman.
Again. Andrea Foster gets free every five years. "It used to be that people only lived to thirty-five," Andrea likes to say. They had her to dinner the other night to show they weren't taking sides between her and Rick. "Monogamy used to work. You didn't have to stir things up to generate a little interest. People lost interest when they died."

Mark didn't say anything, but he was paying attention. Mark's feeling forty and needs a recharge.

"It would be different if Rick were a trucker," Andrea said. "What a marriage needs— Every time you turn over in bed, you've got to be surprised to find somebody there. That's passion. A marriage without an element of surprise has got arthritis."

Linda and Mark's marriage has arthritis. They talked about it that night after Andrea left, and they agree. It's nobody's fault. Everybody's marriage gets arthritis if, after the first five years, somebody hasn't died or become a trucker. Everybody they know agrees.

New tricks. To deal with the problem of marital boredom due to increased longevity in the human species, they must all learn new tricks. Not so, Clouseau. Clouseau lolls on her back, her four paws spread to the four directions, mouth open, mooning at the raccoon. That's been tried.

Clouseau kicks the air. The raccoon purrs. Tonight it'll bleat. What does the satisfied bleating of a raccoon sound like? She doesn't believe she's ever heard raccoons in the act. Doesn't believe she's ever heard any animal in the act under the house except her cats. Wild animals, they're spooky: You don't know where in the hell they are until one day you're making coffee, and there they are in the kitchen with your youngest cat—doting. Clouseau? Well, she doesn't see how this raccoon could have been in on it, not directly in on it, although she imagines a nocturnal animal could be attracted by the bleating and the smell. A bashed up, voyeur raccoon, happy to watch while Clouseau bleeds. Mark told her that at the moment of climax, a male cat's penis sprouts barbs. "It's a phenomenon of natural selection. The female cat's blood clots so the sperm stays in." But it must hurt. And smell. Mr. Inspector Raccoon, attracted to the scene by the whining and the smell, a raccoon shaded under the beams of the house's foundation, those hollow, maybe a little sad, soul-trapped-in-a-raccoon's-body, eyes, watching while the cat bleeds. Then he stops by in the morning for breakfast.

Detachment. Linda could take a lesson from this raccoon. She needs to loosen her grip.

"Have you ever noticed Andrea Foster's hands?" he said. "Chiseled knuckles." "Sculpted hands." "Royal hands." "Ivory Soap hands?"
"That's it."
"Anything you want hands?"
"What's eating you?"
"'The whatever-you-want-Mr., I don't care loose kind of hands?"
"I'm just talking about her hands, Linda," he said. "So what's the big deal?"

_I wish I were a fascinating bitch_, Linda sings softly, and Clouseau abandons the raccoon to roam around her feet. Clouseau likes it when she makes noise. _I'd never be poor, I'd always be rich_. It's a little ditty the high school girls sang on band trips. She thinks of Cathy Stone's black fall, that god-awful horsetail waist-length switch she borrowed from Cathy Stone and clamped to the top of her head one night when the band took a weekend trip to Portland. Five girls in slips lounging on two double beds, a double room at the Riverside Motor Hotel, five town girls in the city. _I'd build myself a house of white. All equipped with a little red light_. Motel night. They vamped. "You look like whores," the boys told them. Sure they did. They carried clarinet and flute cases. But they tried. They borrowed each other's clothes. "You slut," Cathy said when Linda pulled on the yellow turtleneck, two sizes too small, and the size three jeans, and twitched the horsetail fall around on her ass. They smoked on the balcony. Nobody was as small as Cathy, so she couldn't get obscene in somebody else's clothes. She had a black slip, though. She didn't actually sit on the balcony in her slip, so the boys in the parking lot down below couldn't actually see what she was wearing. But they were interested to know, considering what the girls they could see were wearing. Motel night. There were two double beds, two girls per bed, one girl on a cot. They didn't sleep. Linda remembers lying in a room, bright with street lights even though the curtains were pulled, five warm bodies in a smallish room, taking bets on who would lose it first. They were whispering, two hundred miles from home in a steamy motel room that somebody else was paying for. Linda had no doubt that they all had excellent chances of turning into fascinating women.

She didn't know Andrea Foster then. _"Serial monogamy,"_ Andrea said again and again the other night. Sitting cross-legged, shoes off, in their Lazy-boy, hands locked behind her head, wearing blue pajamas that masqueraded as a jumpsuit: Andrea looked directly at Mark and told him she was good for five years. _"Who can sustain that kind of interest longer than five years? I mean—Passion,"_ she said.

Linda believes she would like to spend the day in bed with a science fiction novel. She will go upstairs and put her shoes on, then she'll get a broom, sweep the raccoon out, and retire for the day. She moves towards the door, but the raccoon starts at her
movement. He races, clicking across the tiles, into the laundry room, and Clouseau bounds after him, but the raccoon hisses, and Clouseau bounds back out. Christ. There is a wild animal barricaded in her laundry room, in her doesn’t-have-a-door because-they-gave-the-door-to-David-to-take-to-college-to-make-a-desk laundry room.

"What do we need with a door to the laundry room?" Mark says.

"It’s just a thing, Mom," David says.

"It’s not just a thing. It’s a door. To close, because the washing machine makes noise. We can’t hear each other at dinner."

"So we make a little adjustment," Mark says. "We don’t run the thing during dinner. This is college. The boy needs a desk."

"I don’t want to smell dirty laundry while I’m eating."

"Mom, you’re funny."

She’s funny. Here’s a gaping hole in their kitchen, stuffed with soiled laundry and now this raccoon, and she’s a stitch. She tiptoes to the doorway. The raccoon has its back to her. The animal sniffs a pile of laundry on the floor, sheets from the night-before-last bed, towels from the night-before-last bathroom. He climbs the laundry, sniffs in all directions, sits down, twists his head and looks at her. He begins licking himself. The raccoon gives himself a bath on top of their dirty sheets. Their dirty sheets now smell like wet raccoon.

She should bum those sheets. She will bum Mark’s sleeping bag.

The raccoon stops licking and digs deeper into the laundry, repositioning so he can watch the kitchen comfortably. Clouseau pads back into the room, and the raccoon permits her company. The raccoon looks like he has no intention of leaving.

Linda will leave. She will go to a motel and spend two days reading Isaac Asimov. When Mark gets back, if he wants this raccoon out, let him put it out. She will check herself in for a two night stay. A good motel. One with a pool and a sauna and a Magic Fingers vibrator on the bed. Linda encountered Magic Fingers for the first time as a kid on vacation in California. An earthquake, she thought, but the joke was on her. The bed was shaking. She was sitting in the middle of her parents’ flat bed, she remembers that, and her father was sitting in a chair watching television, and she was floating towards him.

"Pop, I think we’re having an earthquake."

"We are?" He wasn’t moving. "Are you sure? Beth, Linda says there’s an earthquake in here."

"Linda, this bed isn’t moving." Her mother sat on the bed beside her and put her hand on Linda’s knee. Linda remembers
light bouncing off her mother’s wedding ring because the ring was moving along with the bed. "Maybe you're going crazy." Her mother felt her head. "I think you have a fever." But she saw her mother wink at her father, and she knew that they thought she was too cute for words. Somehow, her parents could make the bed shake, and later Linda learned how to put a nickel in the Magic Fingers machine.

It was a glorious vacation, although she remembers nothing about it but putting nickel after nickel in the slot, lying for hours in the middle of ten-thousand fingers that pushed her to the moon. When she closed her eyes, there were springing fingers everywhere. "Pop, let's go to the moon."

She remembers him lying beside her, holding her hand so they wouldn't get separated on the trip. "Are we there yet?" He wasn't sure he had enough nickels in his pocket to get them there. When the nickels ran out, he said, "I'll show you some magic fingers." He sat on the bed and made a church of his fingers.

"That's a child's game," she told him.

"This is serious business," he told her. He laced his fingers, hiding them under his palms, pulled the two little fingers out, pressing the tips together to make a church. "Here’s the church." His two index fingers made the steeple. "Open the doors"—he opened his two thumbs—"and out come the people." He inverted his hands, and wiggled eight fingers still locked together below the knuckles. "Linda, the people in church are dancing. Isn't that bad?" She must have been seven or eight then. She must have been heavy. "Let's go to church," he said. He swung her around and around that room, her swinging feet kicking beds and chairs, swung her with just two fingers.

"What are you two doing?"

"Beth, we're going to church on the moon."

"Pop, we're dizzy."

"Hold on. We're almost there."

It was, without a doubt, the most fun she ever had in a motel room. Next to vamping with her high school girlfriends, the most fun Linda ever had in a motel room was playing children’s games with her father.

Christ. She is not a fascinating woman. She is forty-one years old. Twenty years in this house with Mark. Eighteen years in her father's house. Three years at college. For twenty years she has slept with the same man. She has never done anything. She tries to think if she has any friends whose marriages have lasted twenty years. Off the top of her head, no.

Why does she feel guilty about staying married? About still loving her husband after twenty years? About never questioning that? Linda stares at the telephone on the kitchen wall. She’s
tempted to call Andrea. Checking up, Linda? She never has before. She's never had reason to. Well, she's not the type that checks up. Ha. She's not the type that does anything.

If Andrea answers, she'll just invite her to lunch. Mark's away for the weekend, would you like to come over for lunch? She should get to know Andrea better, anyway. The cats pat the floor around their dishes, around the door, asking to go out. Linda crosses the kitchen and slides the glass for them, looks around at the laundry room. Wide-awake raccoon—he spies every move from his perch, and he holds his bashed up face between his paws. She leaves the glass door open.

She begins thumbing through the Rolodex by the phone. She needs to make a second Foster card. Andrea and Rick still share a card, two numbers now, Rick's in ink, Andrea's in pencil, a soft card around the edges, and blackened from much thumbing. She doesn't call either Rick or Andrea that much.

Linda punches the numbers quickly with her right index, holding the receiver under her chin, her left arm hanging loose. She'll either hang up or invite Andrea to lunch. If she answers. Linda leans back against the wall, listens, tries to see fur through the laundry room doorway, but the kitchen table blocks her view. Nine-thirty by the clock on the wall, and she hasn't yet had her coffee. But one of the cats had a meal and a half. Clouseau's dish shines, licked clean by some hungry cat, fat cat, probably McCavity, all those birds and mice, all the soft-bellied rodents and birds McCavity drops like prizes in the middle of the kitchen floor, half-wild McCavity trying to fill her hollow leg. Linda lays the ringing receiver on the kitchen counter.

She watches a set of black toenails poised at the laundry room doorway. The raccoon walks under the kitchen table, passes the cat dishes without a glance, and walks out the door.

Such a simple thing. He comes in. He goes out. She needn't have concerned herself. Linda crosses the floor to look at the raccoon nest in her laundry room, leans down, puts her hand in the little indentation on top of the sheets—a warm place. The sheets hold heat, still, from the raccoon's body. They hold hair, too. Up close, Linda sees raccoon hair coating her sheets, hair lined in neat rows as if arranged by a tailor.

She stands, measures liquid detergent and pours it in the washer. She can hear Andrea's ringing telephone clear across the kitchen. She sets the washer, pulls the On dial, and as the water pours in, she can't hear the phone anymore. She stoops down and begins to sort the laundry, pulling clothes from the sides of the heap rather than the top because the raccoon hair makes such a neat pattern, she doesn't want to disturb it. Linda gets on her knees and reaches under the sheets, pulling out clothing from the center of the pile.
Her right shoulder relaxes against the washing machine which heats while the hot water pours in, welcome heat to her shoulder because the morning is cold. She twists and sits, pressing her full back against the metal, stretching her legs across little piles of laundry, arranged by color. This whole house is well arranged. One kitchen, one dining room, one living room, three bedrooms upstairs on top of the one kitchen, one dining room, one living room, rooms on top of rooms.

Linda draws her knees up and folds her hands on top of them. The washer quits filling and begins to wash. Because she left the lid open, drops of water spring out, one drop on her hand, two. She brushes them off, folds her hands again, then unfolds them. She laces them together so the fingers hide under her palms. She makes a church, a steeple. She opens her thumbs and lets the people out. She stares at the people outside the church. She folds one finger down. One man. Twenty years. That's pitiful.

She lays three more fingers down on her right hand and a fourth goes down automatically. They don't want to stay laced together once they start coming apart. She tucks all in a fist, a tower of fingers curled one on top of the other, little finger people lined in rows. Five years with Rick, five years with Mark, five with the next guy. It makes Linda tired.

She turns her head, resting her cheek against the washer. She doesn't let her upper teeth touch her lower, holds them a breath apart; the movement inside the washer coming through the metal, coming through her cheek, sets those teeth chattering automatically. She tries to remember the last time Mark touched her. That makes her tired, too—the carefulness he takes to step around her, as if she were brittle and would break on contact. She needs to be touched.

Through the open patio door on the other side of the kitchen, she can see leaves moving in the top of Maple trees. It's funny to see leaves moving but not to hear the wind. You feel suspended when you don't hear what you see. When what you hear doesn't go with what you see. Or when what you taste doesn't have any smell. Her grandmother lost her sense of smell. She had a wonderful flower garden. "Tell me how they smell." Her grandmother had no way of knowing. She said without a sense of smell, everything tasted the same.

Linda listens to water churning in the tub. The vibrating washing machine picks at her spine. She leans away from it, rests her head on her hands. She can see the green phone lying on the kitchen counter. That's funny, too. Watching a phone ring soundlessly. Or maybe Andrea has answered. Maybe Linda's watching a soundless voice talk. She can't know unless she moves in closer.

Ann Cummins
Descent Through Indian Village — September, 1967

Single file we pass
the collapsing dance hall,
sinking Potawotomi graves

Ahead of me, in orange moose maple,
my father chews timothy,
walks softly as a bobcat

Skulls of feral apples
bump in gunny sacks,
nuzzle our backs

I finger scarlet blades
of staghorn sumac, my ex-lover’s
jeans ride hot on my legs

My pregnant sister
kicks hawkweed, goldenrod
out of her way

A green rubber coat
hides her daughter, a puffball
waiting to explode

We make the long descent in bracken
tracking the dead beneath us,
our thoughts on Phu Loi

We stop in the alder brush,
look back as the trail closes,
sniff the twilight like bears

Crossing the creek, my father says,
“The Indians sure got a raw deal.”
We wonder if it’s anything like this
in Vietnam.

Gennie Nord
The Agave Would Know

Only a few of us had seen the star,
So skilled at avoiding
The eyes of the dangerous.
On a slow day,
We would give it names. We
Were children then. It made no difference.
The others had been in another room;
Tequila was in that room.
It seemed sinful in the 50's.
But adventure was always a welcome guest.
After two, with the ocean’s salt
On our lips, we began to smell the good
Cigars. And something
In one of those drugs told us
There would be such jazz in the streets.
Manana. Trust me.
Simply, someone lied. Pages
Flew off a calendar, the way they did
In our parents’ worst movies.
When all of us quit smiling at Castro,
Gin became the only thing with flavor.
We’d let Mexico become a saloon
Full of Agave. We swore there was something
About a star, but for the life of us,
Couldn’t remember its name.

Sam Pereira
He sits in the car and stares straight ahead, blankly
It is night
The wipers scrape across the dry windshield, scrape back
and forth, back and forth
It is the rhythm of ablation
He feels his presence as aleatoric
He feels her presence as absence
He hears the leaves scrape each other’s brittle skin
He feels they finally had no new words
He feels that words come and go like breath
There is no solace in the constant sound of traffic
The only light is in the kitchen window, it could be waning
I am not cold he says or thinks
There in no motion though he hears himself say the word ‘sudden’
He feels himself falling
He feels nothing, not even lack of feeling, nor feeling that
A perfect hole
She put a plum in his mouth once, round, smooth, yielding
The wipers clack back and forth, back and forth
Then he is ‘here,’ he realizes it
And again he realizes it, that he must have been somewhere else
He feels again the weight in his hands, of his hands
Smooth and cool he says or thinks he says
There are many hands he keeps folded
He hears the car fail repeatedly to catch its impulse
He hears the sound of the house, the sound of weight, looming
He knows there is something there he cannot quite reach
It is like an itch, like night
There is a great machine he thinks or says, it is unwinding
He knows what already happened waits to happen
He hears sirens

Paul S. Piper
A Factory by the River

Some girl on a bicycle flags you down.

The male duck pushes the female under water.
We hang our legs over the riverbank.
We can’t go on like this, touching each other’s hair.
Empty wrapper in the dirt.
Sticky dead stalk.
White smoke from the factory.

I walk up and down the hill.
I tell the girl on her bicycle my theories about love.
They float like factory smoke, visible, now nothing.
I should not love you.

I am the girl on a bicycle.
Why don’t you show some consideration and stop me?

I tell everyone’s secrets then lie to cover it up.
Spend a little money, spend more, and what poverty is in store for my heart?

Kathryn Rhett
From the Ashes

So here I am, age 20, in Longview State Hospital, being executed. Here, they do it slowly, like torture, with a needle in the hip every day.

Before I was 20, when I became "Laura Laurelee" and the stone general in North Square Park became my mentor, I was not an extraordinary human being. I was raised in an Iowa farming community, an only child, lying awake most nights while my parents argued and banged things downstairs. Until my father quit drinking and my mother got religious, I spent my childhood years hiding from my father in the closet with a flashlight and my dollhouse, which I’d made from a shoebox and had an imaginary two-inch family living in it.

My parents later tried to make up for those early years. When the interstate came through and my father’s truck stop boomed, the money came to me instead of going to Hadley’s Haven for beer and package liquor. Suddenly, when I asked for $5, they’d give me ten. When I asked for a bicycle, I got a 10-speed. I often thought, when I was 12, that my parents had exploded in their sleep one night and been replaced by new parents.

At 20, I left Iowa and headed for Boston in my '62 VW Bug, hoping for a new life in the city. Although I was a little reluctant to leave my parents, I wanted to break free, capture something, grab life by the horns and climb on its back and ride.

But outside this small Ohio town, my car blew a piston rod. I could hear my dreams being mangled in the engine as I slowed down on the highway near a clump of long, 2-story buildings. I thought it was a college then. I only glanced at the isolated figures on the lawn, thinking they were between classes. Then I saw the sign: "Longview State Hospital," but I didn’t give it a second thought. I walked on into town.

While my car was being fixed, I stayed at the Green Star Motel. I contemplated calling my parents but decided against it. My mother would only whine at me to come home, and my father would launch into a diatribe about the foolishness of my leaving in the first place. They’d both been upset about my move—my mother tearfully fluttering her hands around my hair, my father digging $20 bills out of his pockets and forcing them into my hands. They’d be sure to point out that a broken piston rod was a likely sign that I still couldn’t take care of myself.

At the Green Star, the owner, Mrs. Hawkins, learned of my troubles and offered me a job as a maid to make money for repairs. I decided to stay for awhile. It wasn’t Boston, but that wasn’t the main thing.
So I worked days at the Green Star. I got a small apartment. The winter passed. I considered Mrs. Hawkins one of my friends, since she sometimes offered me a can of Coke at the end of the day. Another friend was a brittle old woman with arthritis in her knee whom I often passed on the walk to work. We usually exchanged a few pleasant remarks about the weather. I didn’t know anyone else.

Meanwhile, I kept my apartment clean, I bought groceries, and I put my pay in the bank. It wasn’t hard; it wasn’t easy. These were just things I did, like putting one foot in front of the other.

But gradually things began to change. At first I thought it was just the weather—spring sun warming the snow, the musical tricklings of icicles melting, the slow rise of green things from the damp earth. Spring fever, I told myself. That’s where the giddy feeling comes from.

I stopped walking. Now I waltzed. I rejoiced in changing the rumpled beds, in emptying the overflowing ashtrays, in digging the mildew from the shower tiles. Mrs. Hawkins’ broad, rubbery face became saintly and serene. The green neon star on the motel sign guided me through the day; its pulsing flash throbbed before my eyes at night. I spent quiet evenings in my attic apartment, speculating about the significance of a passing blue car, smiling at the white shirts hung out on the clothesline, noticing the boy down the street had a bicycle the color of the night sky. A warmth rose in my heart—I saw myself healing the brittle old woman’s bad knee, turning her face to the smooth, pink complexion of a young girl’s.

At work one day, I spent a whole hour cleaning a mirror, absorbed in the slow, wiping movement of the rag across the glass and the way my face looked up close with my nose leaving smudges on the surface. I tried to wipe away my image, but the stranger who stared back at me only frowned, her face contorted. I saw hairline cracks in her skin, and her teeth gleamed like a mouthful of fluorescent lights. Mrs. Hawkins caught me then and chided me for “entertaining” myself when there was work to be done.

Another day, I noticed a dead bird on the motel roof, and I climbed a ladder to take it down, staying up there next to the bird most of the afternoon, planning a proper burial. I saw the bird as a dead spirit, and I needed to say the right chants and incantations to send it to the next world. While I was whispering some of these over the bird, I looked up and saw Mrs. Hawkins in the parking lot, her arms crossed over her large chest, her mouth open as if calling me. She may have called me, but I could not hear her, the chants were so loud in my head. She motioned for me to come down, and I did, carrying the bird. "Laura!" she scolded.
"We just don't have time for this!"

Finally she called me into her office. I sat on the edge of the folding chair before her desk, looking directly into her grey, watery eyes. I never switched my gaze except to notice that she habitually turned her gold ring around and around her finger. My mother did that once, playing a game where she made the twinkling stone on her wedding ring disappear and reappear, like a small eye shutting and opening again. Mrs. Hawkins continued to do it, as though that circulating ring were responsible for the earth turning under my feet.

"You've been a fine maid," she said. "No question about it. But recently your work has been... well, substandard." The ring circled her finger. I felt the earth shift forward another notch. She said, raising a finger, "The Green Star is no place for a young woman to spend the rest of her life. You're not obligated to stay here."

I opened my mouth. Took a deep breath. "But I like it here! Why? Am I in trouble?"

Mrs. Hawkins gazed at me steadily, then looked down at her hands. "Laura, I don't think you're feeling well. I think you need a rest. I think you need to go home to your parents and talk things out."

I stared at her ring. Its shiny onyx glistened like the eye of a small animal trapped in her hands. I could hear it squeaking.

"Laura," she said. I looked into her eyes. "I'd like you to resign."

A faint roar began in my ears. I swallowed hard. "All right," I said. I stood and went to the door, the floor undulating beneath me. I opened the door and turned to Mrs. Hawkins. "Thank you," I said, and I walked home.

With no job, I spent my time in North Square Park, gazing up at the monument of the general. He sat on a carved marble horse, one hand holding a sword to the sky. The marble was stained dark on his shoulders and down the sides of his horse. His bearded face was at first stark and impassive, except for the eyes. Vandals had crayoned a sloppy spiral in each eye, making him look a little wild and crazed. The more I studied his eyes, the more the rest of him seemed to come alive. We developed a relationship based on eye contact, and he began to smile when I playfully saluted him. After awhile, he began to salute back, and finally when I greeted him one day, he spoke:

"Good view up here."

"Is it?" I said, by now feeling completely natural with him.

"You can see the whole world. World's not so good, but the view is."

So began the first of many conservations we had. But I felt
uneasy. Though I welcomed these changes in things, I could not explain why they were happening. I could not explain why I suddenly had the power to give life to stone, or see colors I had never seen before, or understand the whisperings of the trees. I knew I had mystical powers, but I didn’t know what my responsibilities were. Something was happening to the Universe, too—something black and twisted and sinister—and the knowledge of this ate at my heart like a rat in my chest, gnawing and scraping endlessly.

Isolated events in town pointed toward the coming apocalypse. The mayor was involved in an embezzling scandal. A room in the Green Star caught fire, and although the fire did not spread, I saw the room where it happened—smoke-blackened walls, charred carpeting, a mattress with a gaping burned hole in it: "Gutted" was the term the newspaper used—it gave me a sick feeling. Then the little boy down the street was struck by a car. I swore I had heard his screams.

I told the general about these things. One day, he said in a tired voice, "Evil is basic. It runs in cycles." And then in a flat loud voice, he added, "Someone oughta fix that."

I began to see that evil was multiplying to such a degree that goodness was being choked out, and in order to save the good, I had to destroy all I could and rebuild from the ashes of the world I was to destroy.

The general and I spent long hours discussing the problem. He had a gift for summing things up in a few words. Regarding the destruction of the Universe, he smiled grimly and said, "Incandescence. Destroy the essence."

I spent my afternoons walking through town, looking for objects that I could possibly sacrifice as the essence of evil. And then, behind a bicycle shop in the back alley, I found the box. It was a cardboard box, painted black, with white stencilled letters on the side: "DAMAGED." Inside were nine rubber tubes, and I stared at them.

I saw myself crouching in the basement behind the water heater, cutting George Washington’s picture out of a dollar bill for my dollhouse. My father was roaring my name, coming down the basement stairs. I tried to stuff the cut-up bill in the water heater’s pilot light, but my father grabbed me, shouting "Shame! Shame on you!" He dragged me out to an antique piano stool and threw me on it, then snatchéd a strip of inner tube from the pile by the door. He yanked down my pants to my ankles. The rubber snapped and cracked. It stung my skin as he whirled the stool seat around and around, whacking me each time my bare skin passed him.

I saw all this clearly. The tubes in the box looked like nine black snakes that had choked on their tails, feasting on greed and
corruption. Evil ran in cycles, stretching and growing, basic as a snake. When I gathered the courage to pick up the box and take it home, it was so heavy that I could barely carry it. I reached home exhausted, and I put it in a corner of my room, carefully covering it with a white sheet.

The next day I bought a five-gallon can of gasoline and selected a shiny black box of matches from a restaurant in my home town. I put them in the corner next to the box of snakes.

The next two nights I could not sleep. I stayed up, sitting in front of my open window, trying to anticipate each trick the Universe would play in order to preserve itself. At last a distant bell tolled.

That's kind of how it all started. Think of it this way: Something in the darkness reaches for me, but it is only layer upon layer of darkness itself. The tiny threads that hold the Universe together brush across my face, and I wipe them away, again and again, as I pass under the shimmering trees where the insects crouch watching me. The trees whisper my name, "Laura...Laura Laurelee," nodding in their slow, familiar way. The insects' iridescent pinpoint eyes shift and glow.

Ahead I see the general. The lights around him make his figure stark and white, and the nighthawks swirl and call above him. How perfect, I think, for him to witness the destruction of the Universe, with his arm raised high to order the onslaught.

I approach slowly though the trees, carrying the box. The white sheet glows like the face of the moon, the skin of a young woman. "I am a young woman," I say as I near the general.

"Never too young. Never too female to begin again," he says, grinning down at me. I place the box at the foot of the monument.

"Begin again, begin again," hiss the trees.

I place the can of gasoline and the matches next to the box, lining them up in order: snakes, gas, fire. I study the nozzle of the gas can from which rivers of fire will flow, raging through the town and the countryside, an incendiary elixir soothing the Universe as it burns. The shiny black cover of the matches glistens in the light like obsidian used to cut out a heart.

"Whose heart?" I wonder aloud, looking up at the general. He is smirking. "Your heart!" I tease, pointing my finger at him.

He grins, then wipes his mouth with the hand that holds the reins of the horse.

I try to gauge the time, but the darkness is my only clue, and I feel as though I am suspended in oil, hanging somewhere on a minute between twilight and dawn. From where I stand, I can see
the whole park. I believe I am standing on an Indian burial mound, and the grass and trees and walkways fall away into the darkness, a distant row of lighted houses at the fringe. I can feel the presence of those Indians who were slaughtered here, perhaps by this very general. I look up at him. He has heard my thoughts.

"I never told anyone, but I was always sorry about that," he says, looking up at the sky. In the thin light, he looks like my father, the way his lips are pursed and a tiny tuft of beard just below his lower lip sticks straight out. I feel sorry for him, for what a man does in a difficult situation is not always an expression of what he really is, and often a reputation for ruthlessness is a struggle to live down. I sigh and look down at the snakes lying quietly in their black box. When I remember our mission, I jerk my head up to look at the general again. He is gazing across the park, distance in his eyes.

"Wake up!" I cry. He glances at me, his face slipping back into the blank expression he wears for the usual park-strollers.

My cry has alerted two lovers. They are distant yet, walking hand in hand on the lighted lawn before the monument, their faces two pale ovals. "Fawns in the forest," the general whispers. "Only fawns in the forest. They will not disturb us."

I turn away and lean casually against the monument, considering where I will go once the Universe is destroyed. I had planned that I would be a smoke-spirit, and that I could easily travel. To go from the general to the Pacific seems a logical way to progress.

"There will be no Pacific, you fool," barks the general. I only glance at him, imagining rolling green waves and warm sun.


The lovers have stepped nearer. They are watching me. The grand stage is set.

I place the box in the center of the circular pavement before the general, yank off the sheet. The gas spills from the can onto the snakes. They glisten and writhe, a mass of black intestines curling upon themselves.

"What is she doing?" the female lover says. I look at them, the innocent fawns, so blissful in their ignorance. The male lover shelters her shoulder with his arm. He bends to whisper in her ear. I continue to pour the gasoline. When I look up again, the lovers are gone. The lawn is empty, the mown grass sparkling, the slow dark trees nodding and directing me: "Now, Laura Laurelee, light the world."

"Operation Destructo-Creation!" rumbles the general, raising his arm higher.

I slide back the cover of the matches. My hands shake as I
select the one with the most perfect head, and I kneel close to the box. I watch my fingers position the match on the abrasive strip, waiting for some command.

"Am I really doing this?" I ask.

"Yesno, noyes, yesno," say the general. "But it's right."

I look at him. His sword seems to glitter green against the night sky. "All right, then," I say. With a flick of my wrist, the match snaps and flares, leaping into the box. I roll away across the pavement, curled ball-tight.

I wait for an explosion, but there is none. The flames dance over the edge of the box. I rise to my feet. "Very peculiar, very strange," the general chants, "the way things go, the way things change."

I crouch near the flaming box. Black smoke rolls up, smelling oddly of skunks run over on the highway. The snakes hiss and bubble. The trees stand round, applauding me. The general smiles. "Now," he says, "dance."

I begin to dance around the box, slowly weaving my arms into the air, snaking my legs, crouching and leaping. I am a snake sliding up a tree, dripping down into the slime. I step into the box and out again, each time more quickly, feeling the heat of the fire on my legs. The clouds of thick smoke make me reel with their poison.

And then I hear them, the Sirens. They are not the Sirens which lure and pacify. They are warning Sirens. Police Sirens. Their voices sound like a child crying, a mechanical wind-up child. I can see the gears in its throat turning round and round as it scrapes out the sounds. The harsh cries draw nearer. It is the cry of the Universe trying to protect itself. I will be executed as a traitor.

The red flash flits over the lawn as the car pulls up to the fringe of the park. I see two men jump out and begin running across the lawn, toward me.

"Ignore," says the general. "They are not really there. Just go home." I turn away, trying to walk casually, swinging my arms.

As though from a great distance, I hear the men's cries: "Hey! You! Hold it!" I walk on, gazing at the trees. I tell the police in my mind, "I am a lone lover in the park. I'm supposed to meet my boyfriend here. No, I have nothing to do with the destruction of the Universe. A bum was cooking hot dogs there."

Suddenly my right arm is in a tight grip. I swing to look into the face of a man in a dark uniform. He looks vaguely familiar.

"What's wrong with you?" he snaps. He has a ridge of thick eyebrows over deep eyes and a young, tight-jawed face. Could be a relative of the general, I think. I decide to ask.

"Any relation to General. . .?" I can't remember his real name.
"Come with me, Miss," the man says, tugging my arm. I slip from his grasp. "I'd rather just go home," I say. I start to turn away, but he grabs me again, calling to the other man: "Come here! I'm gonna need some help!"

I hear the trees rustling. "Run!" they cry, snapping their branches. "Run!"

I wrestle free and sprint, dodging the trees, jumping over bushes. I am flying, bat-like, over the ground. But then a black, leafy snake rises in my path, its jaws closing on my ankle. I sprawl on the ground, then surge halfway up before something huge and heavy knocks me windless.

The two men circle my wrists with cold metal behind my back. "You're going to the station," one pants. He jerks me to my feet and pushes me forward. We pass the monument, where a man with a fire extinguisher sprays the flaming box. The general frowns, shaking his head. "So now what?" I shout at him. He remains still, unblinking.

"Who are you yelling at?" the man with thick eyebrows says, tightening his hold on my arm.

The other man looks at me closely, his glasses reflecting the monument light like two white faces. "What're you on, anyway?" the man says.

"Destructo-creation," I snap. (I have a tendency to be irritable with police when they pretend not to know what's going on).

"Are you sick?" Eyebrows asks.

"I'm not sick," I say. "Everyone is. The Universe is. We're getting closer to the beginning." I pinch my lips together. I've blown it. Now they know.

"Oh. I see," Eyebrows says, glancing at the other man. We reach the car. Eyebrows guides me into the back seat, sliding in after me.

We drive down dim streets. The clamps behind my back chew into my wrists. Fuzzy voices cough and sputter over the car's radio. The other man says some numbers into it. I look at the floor of the car, wondering what the general would say about this. At last we reach the station. I realize I am going to be executed as a cosmic offender. They know of my mission. They knew of it when they came to the park to stop me. I sigh.

"Ever been here before?" Eyebrows asks as he gets out. I shake my head as he pulls me out and guides me through the door. He steers me down a hall and into a room with several plastic chairs in it, then he goes out, leaving the door open. The chairs look like traps—like the arms will spring up and crush my chest if I sit in one—so I stand against the empty wall, the clamps on my wrists clicking against the plaster.

I can hear the men talking in the hallway, but I can only hear
snatches of what they say: "...on drugs or just out of her gourd. . .two passerby in the park. . .gasoline. . .burning a box of inner tubes. . .acting very strangely. . .no ID. . .check it out."

A big woman with a clipboard comes in, packed into a dark uniform. "Please sit down," she says, her voice echoing off the walls. I would like to sit down, but it seems too dangerous. "I'll just stand here till it's over, if you don't mind," I say. The woman sits in one of the chairs. She runs her hand through her short red hair. Her face looks pasty and tired, as though she is irritated by my presence.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asks. By the way she is looking at me, with her head slightly tilted, I can tell she already knows my name.

"You already know my name," I say, puzzled.

"No, I'm afraid I don't." She is trying to trick me. She knows I have a real name different from the one I think I have, and she will accuse me of lying.

"Which name do you want that you don't know already?" I say.

The woman glances at Eyebrows, who stands at the door, his arms crossed.

"Just tell me your real name," she says. "The one on your driver's license."

I decide to test her. "Laura."

"Laura what?"

"Laura Laurelee."

"How do you spell that?" she asks, her pen poised above the clipboard. I am surprised. I thought only the trees and the general knew I had that name. But they never told me how to spell it. I take a guess.

"Laurelee, like laurel tree, without the 'tr,' or like laurel leaves without the 'ves' and an 'e' instead of an 'a.' That's the way the trees would spell it," I say.

The woman stares at me. "I see," she says slowly. Eyebrows speaks up. "That's not a real name," he says, frowning. "She's lying to us."

Eyebrows steps across the room and looks into my face. I stare back, watching his eyebrows form a furry "v" on his forehead. Maybe he is a vampire, I think. He turns to the woman.

"She's too out of it to know her name," he says. He looks back at me. His face looks strong and tight, like a trap that has clamped down on me, his eyes two screws boring into mine and holding me in place. I snap my eyes away and look down.

"Better get her to Longview," the other man says. "We can't charge her with anything anyway."

Longview State Hospital? Is that where the executions take place? I look up, gazing deep into Eyebrows' hooded eyes. The
Universe burns there; I know he can feel it burning, and that he is trying to save it with his cool, evil smile. "Come along, Miss," he says, reaching for me with a tentacle-like arm.

I bolt for the door. Eyebrows wraps himself around me like a thick black snake. The other man and the woman help to drag me out to the car, where I am dumped on the floor in the back with Eyebrows' knee in my back. I think of the general, wishing I had his sword.

We hurtle through the night, and I can hear the general chanting in my ears: "Destruction—creation—destruction—creation." As the Universe struggles to save itself, I am on my way to be destroyed in the clump of buildings by the highway, to no longer speak or move; where the trees will no longer whisper my name; where the Universe will be the same, going on unchanged, undefeated.

So here I am in Longview State Hospital, going on week three. Every morning, the sun blazes through the heavy screens; the nurses bring my food; the jingle of keys echoes off tiled walls; my parents call long-distance to tell me they love me, they're praying for me, everything will be all right. But it's like the snakes that swallow their tails—the same gnawing, writhing circle that turns around and around, going nowhere.

Through the fuzz of the medication, I struggle to re-create the Universe: I try to re-create the general, smiling down at me, his arm raised high in triumph; I try to re-create his voice, giving me direction and telling me jokes. But it's like putting together a puzzle in the dayroom, where you get a few pieces in place and then, when you're not looking, somebody comes along and takes them apart. It shouldn't be that way. I should only have to re-create things once, and then they should stay. But I keep doing it.

One of these days, the pieces will stay where I put them, and the Universe will be a place I can actually live in. I tell myself that. I tell myself that I will rise from the ashes of those melted snakes and walk through the world like I was meant to. But for now, all I can do is lie awake at night listening, for the general to speak, for the trees to call my name.

Zan Bockes
The ladder won’t make you a star. On its back, won’t take you anywhere, but gives you a place to come home from. Makes you believe you own something, hold something more.
This is true of water and birdnests abandoned as old shoelaces. We must keep the stout-legged ladder, for propped against a lean, a roof or burning house, to the child who sleeps upstairs and the widow the ladder is a hero. How else are we to stand next to the weathervane?
The ladder won’t go anywhere without you, but sits and waits while you hunt, tired from what you are. Lets you walk away and return as many times as you do. Yet, says nothing. Who loves you that much. Who listens when you’re caught in the middle of up
and down,  
can't find your way home. No hand,  
no foot,  
no skirt to look up.  
Listen.  
The ladder hears  
drums  
upriver  
and rings.  

Joy Lyle
I wish I could sing like hummingbirds fly.
I wish I could hear the flowers.
One day the leaves on the aspen are green.
One day you tremble for hours.

One day you feel like a cross without tenure.
One day, like a kid with a match.
I wish I could just blow away like the clouds
or snuff all the stars with a breath.

I wish I could whittle the stone from a peach
into a small basket of hope,
and lower it into a wishing well,
and just let go of the rope.

I wish I could take back the last wish I wished.
But I can’t, and I can’t wish it harder.
One day the worked doesn’t matter so much.
One day it’s meaner and smaller.

One day they dress you in clothes of glass.
One day they board up your eyes.
I wish it wasn’t so far to fall,
wasn’t so hard to fly.

I wish I could go where hummingbirds go
when flowers fall deaf on the lawn.
One day the leaves are waving goodbye.
One day the leaves are gone.

Jim Simmerman
Hawaiian Time

What time stay?

According to my skin getting darker--

Eh, I pack pine so can go holo holo, buy pakalolo, watch TV. No waste time make joke, old man. What time stay?

Waste time, you.
Before time stay home talk story, chug-a-lug okolehao, eat pupus, play slack key kine cha-lang-a-lang. Only good fun.

Old fut, what time stay?

According to my skin, getting darker.

Eh, old man whatever. Makè, die dead. Same smell. What time stay?

Pau hana time.

Come again?

Five o'clock.

Thanks, eh?

No make mention.

Debi Kang Dean
No Pilikia; or, Piece of Cake

for Uncle Jimmy

Hele mai, have one beer.  
Da bossman he wen’ go take one break.  
Eh, brah, no pilikia.

I been married for seventeen years.  
I met my old lady Ala Moana Beach Park.  
I wen’ said, Us go have one beer.

T’ree months later she almost bite off my ear.  
See da scar? She huhu ’cuz I wen’ take  
Another wahine out. But no pilikia.

She told me she wen’ soak her pillow with tears  
Till I wen’ send her flowers and make  
One note li’ dees: Can we have a beer?

See, I wen’ go look in da mirror.  
You not getting no younger, I wen’ t’ink.  
Two week later I wen’ marry her. No pilikia.

So no pilikia about one little fight, brah.  
Just go King’s Bakery, take her one cake.  
Eh, finish your beer,  
--I no like no pilikia.

Debi Kang Dean
A Lesson in What Romance Is

I'm in my footed pajamas. It's the drive-in's third movie--the one, my mother thought, I'd never stay awake for. James Bond's girlfriend takes off her dress and my mother says, "Quick, cover your eyes." I peak just enough to see bouncing breasts through finger slits. This is one of my first inklings of sex. James stands in front of her, a shirt still on his back, and they jump on the bed like kids and kiss. Next, a shot of enemy missles shooting through an ocean.

Denise Duhamel
Motivational Tape Pantoum

No special concentration is required. Thoughts have no boundaries. Spend less of your valuable time, yet increase your productivity. Train your mind to learn faster and remember more. Unleash your musical talent. Become a money magnet.

Spend less of your valuable time, yet increase your productivity. Expand your universe at the touch of a button. Unleash your musical talent. Become a money magnet. Enhance desire in yourself and your loved one.

Expand your universe at the touch of a button. Activate your untapped mental power and improve your game. Enhance desire in yourself and your loved one. Procrastinate no longer. Choose happiness today.

Activate your untapped mental power and improve your game. Train your mind to learn faster and remember more. Procrastinate no longer. Choose happiness today. No special concentration is required. Thoughts have no boundaries.

Don Boes
David H. Lanner
1989
David H. Lanner
1989
David H. Lanner
1989
Around eight o’clock on the evening of October 22, 1954, about two thousand people, hoping to get into Sanders Theater to hear a lecture by the British historian, Arnold Toynbee, formed a line outside Memorial Hall. But Sanders Theater was much too small and over fifteen hundred had to be turned away. Most left quietly. Others were angry. And a few found a way in and had to be forcibly removed before Professor Toynbee could begin his talk. I remember it well because I was one of the gate-crashers.

My name is Roger Rath and by profession I am a Biblical archæologist. Though born in America and schooled at Harvard, I’ve lived most of my life either here in Jerusalem or at some dig in the countryside of Israel. My first book was published in 1963. There have been a dozen since. Today most scholars, whether they agree with me or not, agree that few men alive know the Holy Land as well as I. Yet, the truth is that if I hadn’t crashed that lecture, I wouldn’t be here. That’s the night my story begins.

And it begins with my decision not to attend the Toynbee lecture. October 22, 1954 was right in the middle of the first semester of my senior year, and I was so worried about graduating with highest honors that I left my two roommates standing in a line just beginning to form, and trudged back across Harvard Yard toward our Dunster House rooms to begin my nightly workout with irregular Greek verbs. That was the way I was then. The Sixties had a phrase for it. Up tight.

Yet I hadn’t gotten past the first flashcard when my eyes wandered to a copy of that Sunday’s Christian Science Monitor lying on my bed. Copper Scroll Contains Treasure, shouted the headline. Just ten years after the first Qumran discoveries, Dead Sea Scrolls were still being found. But until that moment, they’d never interested me. No, I’d chosen Greece, an antiquity more temperate in its climate, rational in its beliefs and more germane, I thought, to our Anglo-American culture.

This find, however, held my attention. Instead of the usual eschatological hopes, some ancient Jew had scratched on a copper sheet a list of buried treasure and the directions, albeit at that moment undecipherable, for finding it. What was that treasure? Artifacts. Things saved from the Temple just before its destruction, things like the Ashes of the Red Heifer used by the priests in their purification rites or balsam oil for the anointing of Israel’s kings or the first tabernacle supposedly built by Aaron himself.

I remember the feeling this article started in me, the feeling that the past was alive and I could live in it. Yes, I actually felt the Roman siege beginning. The sacred things must be hidden, a
record kept of their hiding places and that record hidden also. For a moment I became a real Jew. It had all been gibberish before, rules and eschatology. But here was something I could touch. In an instant I had my coat on and was out the door heading back toward Memorial Hall and Arnold Toynbee.

Why? What did I think the Englishman had to tell me? Perhaps it was just the excitement of my fellow students. All week long I'd heard about him. A savant with a brilliant war record, he seemed almost a prophet to them, a man who might grasp the horrors of our recent past and show us a way not to repeat them. This was 1954, a time of post-war adjustment, a time when the conscience of the world was still wrestling with what it had just done to itself even as it tried to avoid what it seemed about to do.

I know I personally hadn't come to grips with the past. A few years before I'd stared wide-eyed at newsreels of the emaciated dead piled beyond imagination. The question of how human beings could do this to each other was easy. We'd been conditioned to believe the Nazis were not human. But the question of how the victims could let it happen, could die that way, not fighting, not running, was harder. After all, I was one of them. And after a while, I could not and would not look. The Holocaust buried itself in me.

I think it was that way for many of my peers. We'd seen something beyond our understanding and were afraid. For my generation all intellectual endeavor, political, philosophical or literary, was really the pursuit of safety. That's why I'd chosen ancient Greece. Yet the article on the Copper Scroll had made me braver. But finding it had also made me late and the line of people waiting to get in now stretched across two blocks, doubled back and ended on the other side of Memorial Hall itself.

Because Sanders Theater seats only four hundred and my roommates were already inside, I knew I had no chance. Yet I went to the end of the line and stood beside the glass doors of the building's locked Kirkland Street entrance. In a few minutes my place showed its only advantage. I could see into the lobby and so knew before anyone ahead of me when they closed the doors. In a moment the only ones left in the lobby were a few campus policemen. Then the clock in the Memorial Hall bell tower began to toll.

It was eight. The lecture was beginning, the crowd dispersing. I couldn't believe it. I love Memorial Hall. Whenever I return to Cambridge, I still find the sight of its gothic mass pleasing. But that cold October night it was no pleasure. It sat there hopelessly impenetrable, a cruciform hulk, a red brick fortress, a stain-glass citadel. And I had only myself to blame. I should have gone
when I had the chance. I was a frightened little grind who deserved nothing more than his flashcards.

As it turned out, fear and the ensuing hesitation caused by fear, were just what was needed. Classical wisdom has it that a man’s character is his fate. I know if I hadn’t delayed, if I had stayed with my roommates, I never would have seen them. But there they were, no more than twenty feet away, four males in black hats and overcoats and a female in a camel’s hair coat. They must have been behind me all along, bunched around a firedoor located at the end of the building. What are they doing? I wondered.

They were trying to open it. The handleless firedoor, not made to be opened from the outside, had not closed completely. By working their fingers into the crack where its edge imperfectly met the jamb, they had gotten a collective grip on it, and I watched them struggle until I saw that they had done it and that the girl was waving at me to come on. I did and inside, to my amazement, she hugged me, then stepped back into the light that was filtering through the door’s opaque glass panel.

"Nita!" I shouted. "What are you doing here?" Nita was my cousin. She was a senior at Barnard and should have been in New York. But I didn’t give her a chance to answer. Instead I hugged her again. What can I say about Nita?

In the Twenties our parents had begun married life with high hopes. In the Thirties those hopes were dashed by a worldwide financial disaster, and two sisters who never got along, had to unite in shared housing found for them by their brother. The only man with a job, Uncle Ben worked for the Hanover Manufacturer’s Trust as an estate manager and was able, at least for the colder three quarters of the year, to get us into the Long Island summer homes of the rich. Our two families lived rent-free as caretakers.

That’s where Nita and I grew up, in drafty mansions with huge forbidden rooms full of ghostly sheet-covered furniture and without central heat. We didn’t care. There was always the beach. There on Long Island’s windy shores, we built our castles, ran our races and threw our balls. Later, when the war came, we scavenged the life jackets, cabin doors and sailor hats sent us by German submarines. And later still, in the marsh grass between the damp dunes, we revealed to each other the secrets of our bodies.

"Have you come to hear Toynbee?" I asked breathlessly.

"Yes," she answered, then slipped from my arms and turned to the others. They were as big a surprise as she. We’d always been contemptuous of such people. "Let me introduce you to my friends," she said.

There were four of them and they wore the traditional beards and ear curls beneath their black hats. One by one I shook their hands. Yet I’m afraid my distaste for their orthodox dress was
apparent. I'm ashamed to admit it but at the time they seemed to me the worst kind of fanatics. And from the looks on their faces I could tell my distaste for them was surpassed only by their contempt for me and all that was secular. Today I would have to admit they were right about the Harvard snob I was then.

"The stairs go down," one of them said. Though we had gotten inside, it was only to the upper landing of a stairway that led we knew not where.

"Watch your step," warned another as the first began to descend into the darkness.

"Don't fall," said the third and the second disappeared.

"You next," said the fourth who was standing behind me. Nita took my hand.

"Come on," she urged and we shuffled to the edge of the first step to begin our descent.

Because it happened so quickly, I didn't question what we were doing. After all, we'd gotten into Memorial Hall and that was something. And only after we reached bottom did I remember my pipe lighter. It was a Beattie and, among pipe-smoking Harvard undergraduates, considered a necessity. It's uniqueness was the metal tube that passed through its flame. When the tube reached a critical temperature, it bent the fire so that it jetted horizontally and could be aimed downward into a pipe bowl.

I took it out of my coat pocket and stroked its wheel. Ah, there was an eerie sight, three wide-eyed Hebraic faces floating in darkness. And it was even eerier when my lighter jetted and they broke into smiles, their teeth surfacing on the dark puddles of their beards. They were delighted with my fire and wanted it to lead the way. Where? Upstairs into Sanders Theater and Arnold Toynbee. I shook my head. Suddenly I was doubtful about being there at all. I could get into a lot of trouble. Besides, it couldn't be done.

"It's built like a church," I explained. "We're not under the theater. It's in the apse on the other side of the transept. We're under the nave."

"Then you know the building," said Nita quietly.

I know if she hadn't been there I would have refused. It was impossible. How could we get from the basement up into the theater? But she was there, her face imploring, her thin hand on mine that held the light. So I agreed and, to give us all some hope, told them to be on the look-out for the floor-plan whose display I knew was mandatory in all Massachusetts public buildings. We started down the corridor.

"What is it?" one of them asked.

"Don't know," said another.

We'd moved forward only a few feet when we came upon a
large room whose walls, the instant of our entry, seemed to burst into flame.

"What's that noise?" asked Nita.

As soon as I heard the cooing I realized where we were. Unlikely as it seems now, and due no doubt to a post-war lack of space, in 1954 the basement of Memorial Hall housed the laboratory of Dr. B.F. Skinner, famed experimental psychologist and inventor of the Skinner Box. What we were looking at was a wall of Skinner Boxes, rectangular glass containers each the size of a ten gallon fish tank. They were piled floor-to-ceiling and each contained not fish but the reflected jet of my lighter.

"What's that smell?" Nita asked.

"Pigeons," I answered. To my left I could just make out a large wooden coop behind whose chicken-wire door stirred the cooing experimental subjects.

"Pigeons?" they asked almost in unison. So I explained where we were and what the boxes were used for and then about Skinner's idea of re-enforcement. Today I think of B.F. Skinner as intellectual hogwash, an animal trainer at best, an animal torturer more likely. But back then I must have taken him quite seriously. And I was showing off in the only way I knew how. I was being didactic.

"Over here! Bring the light!"

That was the second time I heard his voice, the one who had been behind us on the stairs. I could tell by the way Nita let go of my hand but kept her eyes on mine that he meant something to her. She was smiling at me, an affectionate but patronizing smile, as if to say you're still the same Roger, that while you've been talking someone's been acting and that we really don't care about your Psych 101 class.

So she took my lighter and brought it to him. And we followed her, walked through the lab and further up a narrow corridor to where he was. Unlike the other three who were small, kinky-haired and dark, this one was tall and his beard blonde though there was no mistaking he was a Jew.

"The floorplan," he announced as he pointed at the wall. And there it was in an oak frame and under glass. There was supposed to be an emergency light above it. But I remember my lighter as being the only light.

"We're here under the center hall," he said.

"Transept," I corrected.

"Look!" cried my cousin.

"What?" asked the young man beside me.

"The toilets!" she shouted.

"Toilets!" Even through their beards you could see their faces wrinkling with disgust. And to have it announced by a woman
too. It was as if they’d come in contact with menstrual blood. Ach, I’m afraid I still don’t have much patience with the orthodox. Not that kind, anyway.

"But look!" Nita jammed her finger into the map. "There are stairs going up."

I used to wonder who was responsible for this twist of my fate. It turned out to be the Dante translator, Charles Eliot Norton. President of Harvard just after the Civil War, Norton campaigned hard for Memorial Hall as a monument to the school’s war dead. And it was he who insisted on Gothic architecture as the only architectural style for a Christian society. But it was also the most expensive and by the end, to cut costs, stairs were put in so that two floors could share the same plumbing.

"And they come up inside the theater!"

I remember standing in front of the floorplan trying not to believe my eyes. You’d think they would have put them in the lobby. But for some reason Sanders Theater’s Men’s and Ladies’ Rooms are inside the theater itself, in those short entrance halls just to either side of the stage. Oh God, I thought, let the doors be locked.

"This way! It’s not locked!" The Men’s Room was locked. The Ladies’ Room was not. I hesitated. Nita waited for me at the top. "Hurry!"

But once up there I hung back and stepped out only to peek around the corner at the stage. There was Arnold Toynbee. Because of the angle he couldn’t see the Ladies Room door. But the sudden appearance of four Jews in beards, black coats and hats entering stage right must have been terrifying. In mid-sentence he stopped, his eyes going wide, his mouth opening as if to scream.

For a moment it was terrifying. Then it wasn’t. It was funny. For there seemed to be young rabbis scampering in every direction, shouting to each other in a strange tongue, while campus police, fat sweating Irishmen with huge red faces, chased them down, all to the cheers of the smart-alec Harvard audience.

"Over here!" the students shouted. "Here’s one!" It took only a few minutes to restore order.

But it was enough time to allow me to settle with Nita among the standing-room crowd at the back. I remember my heart pounding and my eyes unable to return the gaze of my laughing friends sitting toward the front. But we’d made it and when all was quiet again, I was looking down at Arnold Toynbee. He was smiling at us now and making a joke of it. Tall, thin with iron gray hair and piercing eyes like an eagle, he seemed the perfect man to represent an empire, even a dying one like the British Empire.

And when he was ready he swept us up through time, through
twenty-one civilizations, through Sumer and Akkad, Babylon and Egypt, through advances and decays, challenges and responses, until we were high enough to see the Roman Empire and our own era as if they were side by side. And in the doom of one he read us the doom of the other. This was Toynbee’s dialectic, the clash of civilizations. Then he took us even higher to show us the new civilization that was bound to rise to a new spiritual height upon the ruins of the old.

It’s old hat now. It was old hat then. But not to me. That night it was new, not what I’d come for perhaps, yet somehow better. How had I missed the drama of history? I’d taken the right courses. I just hadn’t listened in the right way. So when it was over, while Nita went looking for her friends, I joined the crowd gathering around the stage. Toynbee was answering questions. I remember someone asking him who he thought had made the greatest contribution to the intellectual history of the West.

"Augustine," he answered without hesitation, "Bishop of Hippo."

"Why?" someone else asked and there was a hush as the historian went on to explain his choice.

"Imagine the times," he began. "The mind of the Western World on the verge of re-creating itself. Hellenized Christians and Oriental Manichees battling for control." He paused. The hush grew deeper. "Imagine it," he said. "A universe of dark powers pitted against one promising victory for the light." He paused again. "Into this intellectual maelstrom steps the genius of one man. His choice will be the choice for unborn millions."

What a marvelous answer, as dramatic as cowboys and Indians, but with a ring of historical inevitability about it that masked its naive faith. And who knows? Perhaps Toynbee was really describing what he thought of himself and his own role in history. At the time I thought he was talking to me, ordaining me.

"They’ve been arrested," interrupted Nita who was now pulling me away from the stage. I shrugged, gave a last look at the historian and went with her. It was my doing that Nita was not with her friends. When they ran out, I’d held her back with me and hid with her behind the Ladies Room door until the commotion moved away.

"You drive," she said. "I don’t know my way around." She presented me with a set of car keys.

"Do you want to go to the police station?" I asked. "I think it’s at Cambridge Square."

"No." She shook her head. "We planned for this. I’m supposed to go back to Brandeis and wait." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "Do you know the way?"

I said yes though I had only a vague idea and we rode around
until I found someone from whom to ask directions to Waltham. We said nothing the whole way. So it wasn’t until we were parked in a Brandeis parking lot that she confessed what they were trying to do.

"We wanted to confront him about his anti-semitism," she said. "We wanted to break up the lecture. We almost did."

"Really?" I was stunned. Break up the lecture! I know it’s nothing compared to what went on in the Sixties with Viet Nam; the classroom bombings, the attacks on professors. But in the Fifties such a political demonstration on an American campus was unthinkable. "Really?" I repeated. I hadn’t understood their intentions at all.

"I’m a coward," Nita sobbed suddenly. "I was the only one left. I should have done something! I sat through the whole thing wanting to. But I couldn’t. I’m a coward!"

"My God!" I said.

At that moment the thought of her heckling the voice of history, the very voice that through the Copper Scroll had been calling to me, was almost sickening. It wasn’t just the embarrassment she might have caused me, though that was certainly important. I think it was also the realization that she had grown so far from me and was involved in something so alien to me. It seemed she was under a spell. What had happened to Nita?

"I’m a coward," she repeated and took my hand. And with her touch the sickening feeling in my stomach began to subside. Somehow her touch reminded me that she had not acted, that the danger was passed and that she was here alone in a car with me. We were friends again and she needed a friend. She was crying desperately.

"Please," I said, "don’t." And I took her in my arms and made the same consoling sounds I’d made just a few years before when we were children, the same sounds as when I’d held her on the cold beach. And just as it had then, our embrace led to other things. In a few moments we were kissing, then touching, our fingers spreading our passion, our mouths tasting the salt on our skin.

I think it was always so with Nita and me. Passion came easily to us. But at what price? I remember a pregnant thirteen year old waiting for her erratic period. I remember the way she used her razor, the neat slashes across the backs of her calves. Freud talks of masochism as the lust for pain, anger inverted, punishment for real or imagined guilt. Whatever the cause, it was always Nita’s intensity that got to me, that in many ways spoiled me and made me love her as I’ve loved no other woman since.

"Get out!" At first I didn’t understand. I sat up but didn’t see anyone. "Get out!" I was looking at Nita. She was looking over
my shoulder, a horrified expression on her face. I felt something pulling at my back.

Then I was outside, he standing before me, his black hat silver in the moonlight, his blonde beard a metallic mass. He’s come for the car, I told myself and offered the keys that were in my hand. He seemed startled. Then he reached for them, my pipe lighter in his hand. Fair exchange, I thought. But his hand continued past mine.

"Traitor!" he hissed and my own lighter, his big fingers folded tightly around it, crashed against my stomach. Then it was I who seemed to hiss, slowly fall and hiss, breath escaping uncontrollably, none entering. I remember the asphalt hitting me even harder than he had, jarring me almost unconscious. But the need to breathe was too great and I wouldn’t let myself go under.

So I focussed on my lighter that he’d thrown down next to me. I grasped its silver shape and pulled myself up around it. I’d never been punched before, not like that. I felt unbounded rage. A traitor! To what? To whom? Of course I understand now what he meant. But then it seemed so unjust and unreasonable. What did it have to do with Nita and me? What loyalty did I owe him?

"Kill me!" I heard off in the darkness. It was Nita’s voice. "Kill me! I’m a whore! A coward! Kill me!"

Still struggling to breathe, I managed to get to my feet. The moonlight glimmered through the branches and I staggered toward the sound of her voice. I remember not knowing where I was going. But my rage had turned to something else and I was only afraid he would hurt her as he’d hurt me. Then I fell again, sliding, sprawling over the frozen earth. The cold air burned my lungs. And there they were below me in a clearing, a kind of natural amphitheater, Nita standing in moonlight, the large young man to one side, in shadow, like a judge.

Somehow it all became stillness, the bright, dark stillness of a Rousseau dream painting. And in that dream Nita brings her right hand up to her face and moves it across her right cheek, then her left. And with each movement her flesh pulls away from her fingernails. I didn’t understand. What was she doing? And it wasn’t until the lines made by her fingernails thickened and coalesced and her face shone with the rich darkness of her own blood and she was on her knees tearing at her flesh, that I understood. Even now I’m astounded by the beauty of Nita’s act.

Yes, beauty. It’s the only word I can use to describe the feeling it evokes in me. Freudians would explain Nita by her personal history; guilt for a fetus flushed down a toilet, for a father jailed for selling blood on the black market, for a mother who drank and entertained men. But to me she was more than that. Imagine coming upon Oedipus in the agony of his contrition. Why would
that be so beautiful? Because he does it to himself. Self-punishment is the first proof of moral governance at work in the universe. It's why I'm writing this now.

Of course, that night I couldn't see the beauty of it. All it meant to me then was that she loved him more. She'd never done anything like that for me. And I remember him stepping out of the shadows to kneel beside her as he tried to wipe her face with his handkerchief. Finally he was just holding her, then leading her away. And I remember wanting to follow them, to run down on them and smash them with my fists. Both of them. But I didn't. I didn't do anything. I was afraid. And I think I knew then I was being childish.

I'd always taken a sadist's pride in her masochism and loved her as a little boy would love, cruelly. It was the only love of which I was then capable and I remember getting up, holding on to an icy tree trunk, weeping with rage and vowing never to see her again. And I didn't, not until eight years later anyway. It was at a party she was giving at her Greenwich Village apartment. The winter of 1963. I was already divorced and had just spent a month in the desert. I was only back in the States to see the publication of my first book.

Nita found out I was in town and called to congratulate me and to ask me to a party she was giving for a friend. At first I didn't want to go. But she seemed to want me there so badly, I quickly said yes and brought a young Bennington dancer I'd met at another party and drank too much wine and spoke to my cousin for a long time in her kitchen. I remember she was thinner than ever. But what she'd done to her face that night in the Brandeis woods had left no scars. My face, on the other hand, had changed remarkably.

"What happened to you?" she asked with concern. My hand went to my forehead and touched first one side, then the other, as if I was beginning the sign of the cross.

"I tried to rescue someone from a burning a house."

"You?" she asked. Such an act was not in the character of the self-centered boy she'd grown up with.

"Yes, me." I smiled. "But it was a false alarm. I got burned for nothing." She reached out and touched my scars. Each the size of a quarter, they were just above my temples.

"They make you look like Michelangelo's Moses." She smiled as she said it.

"I'm a pretty tame Moses," I said, my right hand going up to my right scar. "My horns have been polled." I thought she'd laugh but she looked away. "What about your Judaism?" I asked. I think I was really asking about him, what she thought of him now, the one who had hit me.
"I'm not..." She shook her head sadly, put out her cigarette by running tap water on it, then threw it into an empty grocery sack on the floor. Almost immediately she lit another. "I'm seeing a shrink again," she said.

"Oh?"

"I tried to kill myself." She looked up. "I guess you heard." But I hadn't. I'd been in the desert. Though I knew it had always been in her, nevertheless it was shocking news and brought my guard down even lower so that toward the end of our conversation, I told her I loved her, that I always had and always would.

"And I you, Roger," she replied, tears in her eyes. "I was never happier than when I was with you." But after only three puffs she put out her cigarette and again, from the pack she held in her hand, took another. Then she was opening and closing drawers. When I realized she was looking for a match, I produced my Beattie.

"Your lighter," she said as she pulled my hand to her face to inhale the fire before it jetted. I still wonder about that moment. Was it seeing the lighter in conjunction with her hand and face or was it because she declared her love for me as easily as she blew smoke? Whatever the reason, I was again reminded of the night of the Toynbee lecture and him, the young man for whom she had ripped her flesh.

"That's not true," I snarled. "You loved him more! A fanatic! A religious fanatic!"

How small I was! What a terrible, cowardly thing to say! For not fifteen minutes before she told me he'd been reported missing in Israel in the 1956 War, his body never found. It's been seven years, she said. I used to dream of him and talk to him and when I'd wake up I'd be sure he was still alive. She said it was after those dreams stopped that she tried to kill herself.

Now she was looking at me, first in amazement, then confusion and finally, anger. Her hands trembled and she threw the just lit cigarette into the sink. Our eyes met. I saw fire in hers and thought for a moment she would rip her face, that she was about to do it for me. But Nita didn't do anything. Or rather she took another cigarette, then my lighter and again brought the flame near her face.

"Would you like to stay here tonight?" she asked. With each word smoke slipped from her mouth. I nodded. I was full of desire for her.

But when I left the kitchen a few minutes later I found my Bennington dancer and fled. Why? At the time I wasn't really sure. I know I wanted to stay. There had once been so much pleasure between us. Then why did I leave? I think it had something to do with the way she asked me. A slyness in her
voice. Was I afraid of that? Perhaps. But I also felt how much she loved me and I knew that no matter what happened, Nita would never harm what she loved.

Then was I afraid of what I might have done to her, afraid that with my still seething anger and jealous passion, I might have revealed to my cousin her lover's fate, told her the story I'm going to tell now and forced her to her ultimate self-punishment? Even so, why didn't I stay? Why didn't I let whatever would happen, happen? The answer's obvious. I've already given it. I was afraid. I still am. But now I must tell. I must put on paper what happened and the terrible things I did.

*Earl Ganz*
Listening to Secretaries

All day he heard others excuse themselves, all
self-deceived. He heard his own voice, he
heard the noise of falling waterfalls, of
water falling into a glass, poured from a spout,
he heard their sadness, the lessening flow of a
shallow watercourse across dry farmland.

They and he were wrong. And the sky, the distant
hard dry arch of the sky, it too made
excuses for its failure, was wrong.

Raeburn Miller
Thinking of Kierkegaard

I’ve never told you that you talk in your sleep,  
how I steal poetry from you  
as you dream. 
I never told you about the woman who called one evening,  
how strained her soft voice was,  
that I wrote a story  
imagining your infidelity.

Your shoes are two dark holes  
that I would never step into,  
but I might whisper into that abyss now and then. 
Trust is a very high trestle.  
You walk it on a dare  
in front of an audience,  
and it’s the idiot who does not tremble,  
even though the sky is the most innocent blue,  
and there is just wind, your hair, a bird calling into the gorge.

Deborah Slicer
Desire

Holding hands in a circle the children sing:  
red bird red bird through my window.

Squirrels chase their tails  
around an old tree:

they are not looking for anything;  
that is what they are not saying.

Joy Lyle
Poem After Cesar Vallejo

The sorrow that splits the handle of the hoe
and buries the day under a rotting stump;
the sorrow of the disappeared
appears only at dusk
and makes its way carefully from room to room.

The sorrow that stains the palms of butchers in the market
and paints cobblestones the true color of the sun;
the sorrow of the tired
singes sweat into the skin
and collects the hair of the dead in small, deep sacks.

The sorrow that laces women’s shoes in the morning
and scrubs tea stains from the bottom of chipped cups;
the sorrow of the lonely
shies away from mirrors
and hides with the beetles under the front steps.

The sorrow of the breath of men at sunrise
spills forth all their days like spit from their tongues;
the sorrow of the defeated
stitches its clothes from the evening
and bends tree limbs into elegies with birds who visit the dead.

Boyd White
A cloudburst looms—cumulonimbus massed over the city, tracking northward to shadow the University bus; the embedded convective cloud thickening and spreading to plunge this campus into premature dusk with slanted shafts of rust-coloured rain: I remember everything I ever learned about the weather.

So cross an open playing field and the oval track from the bus stop and head for the tallest building and the best vantage point from which to watch. Hear first and then smell the searing hiss of ozone: sense the crackle of scorched grass, the air so static-filled my hair tingles, caught as I am between a seething sky and the bristling, smoking earth: and then me, the conductive material linking two oppositely-charge bodies.

The pyrotechnics here in the heavy east will be foreign, different from the faint flushes of lightning over the cool inlet back home, in the rain forest, and the luminous ribbons that fluttered along the mountain ridges—although, that's all nostalgia and not really how it was or could ever be. That's all geography, from textbooks, carefully worded to say nothing about proximity.

My mother lies on her side, curled around her own clenched fist, which she clutches to her stomach. She keeps her face turned away, but I'm waiting in the doorway to her room, one tentative hand on the glass doorknob, the other on the jamb, because she calls me to her. Despite her position on their unmade bed I can still see the bruises over her eyes, along her cheekbones. She makes no attempt to hide from me the welts on her back and shoulder, raw seams on her skin running beneath the thin straps of an old slip she wears, angry weals like the kind left on white flesh by leeches from the lake. And the backs of her thighs, lumpy like the bread dough she pummels with those fists and rolls into lard-smeared baking tins.

She snuffles and wipes her bloody nose on the green bedspread. "So get a clean glass," she says, swinging her pallid legs around and sitting up. She places her yellow feet on the floor amid shards of broken glass. She wears a pair of my father's diamond socks to keep her feet warm, and she keeps a bottle of his whisky under the bed. It's this she's reaching for, one strap falling loose and revealing vivid red lashes across her sallow chest, and on that single withered breast a brutal rash I later come to recognize as a series of fresh cigarette burns.

One great truth has always sustained me. If my father taught me anything he taught me that women won't run away.
"What are you afraid of?" my father asks hunched over. He discovers me hiding in my closet, because if I open my eyes and lightning flashes I might see it, and if I take my fingers out of my ears and thunder cracks I might hear it.

His ruddy, insistent face—the ever-present beads of alcohol sweat that glisten on his high, slick forehead, that coast his protruding upper lip with an oily sheen—demands an answer.

"The thunder," I say, lying like any other frightened eight-year-old.

He laughs, a thin, whining sound. "There's no thunder," he says and touches my hair, unaware that my stomach's churning, that my guts are in a vicious knot. "Go outside," he booms, "and see if some lightning hit a tree or set the old garage on fire. Then you go and sit there. Go on. Lightning never strikes the same place twice. You remember that."

Probably, there's no reason to fear him, although nothing he ever says convinces me that I'm safe, that he won't one day come after me. But he has other ways: on camping trips he likes to tell ghost stories in the tent at night. Pitch dark and he'll say, "Make sure you don't sleep too close to the tent pole, there. Lightning might hit it. You never know." Only once do I ever glimpse a sheet of silver lightning through the blue canvas. It renders the sky membranous, exposing the ripe veins. "Was that thunder?" he'll say at the dinner table, cocking his head in an exaggerated tilt, and cupping an ear. Or, "We sure could use a good thunderstorm. To clear the air." then he watches while the paralysis that grips his son—me—takes hold and spreads, thickens. There is never the need to beat or mark my flesh.

"Where's he going?" kids at school ask whenever thunder chases me from the classroom. A single flash or just a dimming of the overhead lights, the roar of a jet, the rumble of another class being marched down the school corridor, any of these send me rushing home in cringing humiliation to see if she's ok.

"He's afraid," someone always shouts. Whispering starts, nervous, excited.

"There he goes again!" they shriek as I run, disgraced, bowels gurgling, breath sour with panic and coming in short sharp pants.

Often she forces me to return in the afternoon, steeped in my shame. Only during the summer holidays is occasional comfort derived from one of these degrading bouts of hysteria. While neighbors and kids on my block revert to normal activity after a heavy thundershower, come out again on the steaming streets or chatter on their verandas, I wait quaking in the profound silence that follows a summer squall. Is it over? Is it really over?
Storms have been known to backtrack. It's much like the fabled quiet before a storm, but more conclusive, final.

When he beats her she rewards herself with a hot bath in Epsom Salts. He brings her Five-Star whisky in a cheap champagne class, to drink while her bruises soak. He places the plastic radio angled on the edge of the tub, and he plugs it in, while I do homework and wait for the radio to drop.

Twelve years old, I stand in short centerfield hoping Ross will pitch this guy low and away, like we planned before the game. But Ross comes in over the plate and the batter just misses his pitch, sending a weak line drive right at me, instead of lifting a high flyball over the fence for a home run. No need for me to even move. Just reach up with my glove and pluck the dying ball out of the air.

"Nice catch," Ross calls from the pitcher's mound. He knows it was close. The coach will wonder why I'm playing so shallow.

From centerfield I can see the flow of the game. Everything is always in front of me. From the outfield I can pretend this park doesn't belong to this school, this town, this age.

When Ross strikes out the second batter on three straight pitches, the infield begins to chatter. "Hey, hey! Hey batter!"

Clouds surround me. Somehow they swing around from behind, anvil-headed thunderclouds, top-heavy with black bursting underbellies. It could be too late already.

To my right, the outfielder chants, "Two four six eight nine, batter looks like Frankenstein!"

That weak liner came from the bat of their best hitter. I should have been deeper. It's easier to run in than back to make a catch. Keep the ball in front of you. But I lucked out. Ross and I both committed mental errors. He gets the pitch in and up and I misplay the hitter. Yet we escaped unscathed. If the hitter gets hold of on... But then I see those clouds, black and boiling up with summer static. Sharp slanted rays of the fast-disappearing sun create planes of deepening black and downward fans of sudden rain.

Ross runs the next hitter to a full count then loses him. He walks a second man on four pitches.

The left- and right-fielders talk it up, calling encouragement. "This one swings like a rusty gate!" They expect me to start stuff like that. The centerfielder is supposed to be in charge. The infield tries to rattle the batter as he steps into the box and taps the plate—"Hey! Hey! Batter! Swing!"

Two runners on but I still play in tight. If one gets by me it's good for two, maybe three runs. I don't see lightning but thunder
breaks and rumbles overhead. Parents stir on the sidelines. They move their lawn chairs back and send their smaller kids to the cars while I drift further out in centerfield, deeper with each pitch, away from them all, hoping no one will notice.

The batter shifts his grip and wriggles his feet in the dirt. He’s nervous and fouls off another pitch.

I stare straight ahead. My chest constricts, leaving me breathless; my buttocks clench in cold fear. Off to the side I sense a flash, a cool whiff on the periphery of my eye. I’m sure I see one. Why is Ross playing around with this guy? Why doesn’t he finish him off?

The hitter strikes out with runners on first and second, releasing me. He throws his bat down in the on-deck circle.

My cheering teammates run in. Without looking back or up or to the sides, I float off the field, past the row of trees and the school. Far enough away from the game I break into a panicky trot, my feet seemingly mired in molasses, finally racing home to hide in my bedroom with my fielder’s mitt still clutched on my left hand.

Desert them. My teammates. In the middle of an inning.

Before my turn at bat.

Pull the drapes and close my door and wonder how long before I jam my fingers in my ears and crawl into bed. How long before I squeeze my eyes shut.

I never should have been playing in so tight: it’s starting to affect my game.

Sixteen, and I steal my father’s Plymouth on a regular basis. He’s too drunk every Friday to notice. I join the wrestling matches at the local Drive-in theatre, fumbling with my ashen girlfriend, the two of us sipping from a bottle of lemon gin, that trusted panty remover, so legend has it in the girl’s locker room as well as the boy’s. On-screen Godzilla fries half of Tokyo with his breath while Japanese scientists bombard him with electronic shockwaves. He eats the stuff, growing stronger on the fumes.

Sinewy tendrils of heat-lightning flicker in the distance. Too far off to worry about yet, but I’m more relieved than disappointed when I give up trying to render the girl naked and drive her home. We paw each other briefly in front of her house, both of us sweaty and frustrated, then she rushes inside.

At my place my father sprawls unconscious in the kitchen. I step carefully around a shattered whiskey bottle; splinters of glass still glint in his headwound. My mother’s jaw is broken and three of her teeth lie on the floor, snapped off like chicklets, like tossed white dice.
Sweep the glass and drive her to the Emergency Ward where they wire her mouth shut.

While she sleeps I stand guard. My bleeding father can stitch himself up. I take the long, carving knife and bury its steel blade in the kitchen wall, surprising myself by not killing him.

June. The end of school. The last summer before college in the fall. He purchases a lightning rod, then shares a twenty-sixer of Five-Star with her and offers me the plastic star from the front of the bottle. I used to wear them stuck on my shirt, my puny chest plastered with a half dozen or more sheriff’s badges. My galaxy of stars.

Dad—for that’s who he is, despite the cruelty, the rancid breath, the constant sweats, the incoherent rages and tirades. I’m as dependent on his disturbed fatherhood as were any of the early-sixties television kids on their domesticated, well-meaning Pops—Dad swings an old wooden ladder to the eavestrough and climbs to the roof, breaking first the bottom rung. He clambers up the shingled slope, scrambling on his hands and knees, the prized lightning rod clutched like a freedom flag in one hand.

"Watch this," he shouts, tickled with his own ludicrous image. "Look at me, college boy."

My inebriated mother watches from our overgrown front lawn. She’s giddy and holding on to what’s left of the Five-Star. "You know your father," she apologizes.

The father I am guilty of knowing straps the lightning rod to our red brick chimney. Miraculously, he doesn’t fall and break his grimy neck, but he does manage to mangle the tv antenna. With a high, girlish giggle he slides down the roof on his rump, and makes it down the ladder with only a couple of clumsy missteps. Back on solid ground again the father who knows best around our place stumbles to his knees, wheezing and choking on his own laughter.

"If we don’t get hit now," he claims, and struggles to his uncooperative feet to brush at his scuffed knees, "then there’s no God. How about them apples?" he says smiling at me, challenging the skinny kid who graduates on the honor roll, who looks more like his mother than his dad. Where tv fathers bumble, he stumbles and staggers; where they recover their good-citizen balance and the graces of their neighbours in the final fading few minutes of the show, he trips over his own feet on his own front lawn.

Summer jobs take me to small towns and hot climates in the interior of the province. Between my turbulent first and second
semesters, when I am placed on college probation for excessive absences from class, lightning sets a nearby barn ablaze roasting alive the pigs penned inside. For days the bitter air reeks of their electrocution and bacon.

Driving a local girl’s rust-encrusted Chrysler, a real boat, I’m momentarily blinded when a towering bolt with a dozen crackling rootlets strikes the white line down the middle of the highway that winds out of town. In our darkened room rented for the night, she wants the curtains open so she can watch. Electrical storms excite her. Furious sheets ignite the skyline and sizzle overhead, all flashing at once. Multiple cannonshots crash and pound our small motel. While I will my eyes shut and my ears plugged, she lies nude, entranced. The thunderclaps are deafening. The storm grinds on for hours. When she sleeps I cover her, draw the curtain closed and remain awake until the danger passes minutes before daybreak. It’s safe again. She’ll never know how close she came.

The fourth doctor I see in six months is more impatient than the others. He’s not a fan of phobias, and not the least impressed with mine, despite its persistence. He is also not overly excited about putting in time working for the campus student health services.

He shakes his head at all I say, sucking in smoke from the cigarette drooping from his bottom lip.

Between years two and three I eat lunches parked in a shiny black Bronco owned by the foreman of a reforestation crew. I’ve grown bolder away from the charged atmosphere of home.

Here, thundershowers sweep the eastern slopes of the Rockies. Alternating patterns of light and shadow flow along the low hills.

My mother has been hospitalized, my father finally jailed. She is treated to electroshock therapy. He’s doped, stupefied by narcotics, given jolts of aversion therapy. The juice only sustains him. The bastard loves it. I can only wonder if this long-overdue breakdown is caused by my absence. Without me there does he pursue her harder?

But my mother always takes the path of least resistance.

Third year and I transfer out-of-province.

Lightning strikes dilapidated barns, cows grazing in the fields, golfers slicing along fairways, boats floating on lakes, people getting in and out of cars, children hiding under smoldering trees and a man in the United States a total of five times until he takes to his car one afternoon to escape the onslaught of a storm, drives...
across the stippled countryside, stops and gets out at what he considers a safe distance and is struck by a rogue bolt a sixth time, and killed.

*Ripley's Believe It or Not* contends that another man, exiting from a small stone church, is hit by lightning that first strikes the piked steeple then bounces off and burns all the clothes from his body. He's found unconscious and naked but unharmed except for a scared ring of scar tissue left around his neck by the gold crucifix he wears. Believe it or not.

Before beginning classes my final year I go to the Graduate Student Lounge where they are supposed to refuse me service at the bar. I do not join the graduate elite for another year yet. The air outside carries the acrid sting of burnt ozone, and the Grad Lounge is located on the top of a fourteen-story highrise of offices.

Women here see me as something of a prodigy, so young, and they volunteer to buy me drinks. They inquire into my non-existent thesis and are informed that various psychology texts maintain that phobias are used to express feelings too complex and frightening to put into words, and that they only occasionally respond to conventional forms of therapy. Struck inarticulate like that, I am assured seduction.

My last undergraduate year crawls by. A fifth psychiatrist hypnotizes me.

"Forget the past," he says. "We can change your life starting right today." I flashback instantly to my leaving home two years ago. The loaded plane holds on the tarmac as late-summer lightning streaks across the horizon. The pilot receives clearance from the shrouded tower, I close my eyes—it's planes and flying these fellow passengers will think I'm afraid of, and I smile to myself and listen to the sibilant whoosh down the runway as we're sucked off the ground by a vacuum our own momentum creates in front of us, so I believe. Engines roaring defiantly, we angle up through the thunderheads.

This fifth shrink, a coffee-guzzler who's applied for internships at every hospital in the country and several abroad, tells me while I'm in a trance to think of something likeable when there's a storm. "Think of sex," he advises me.

He then takes me on a trial run. In my head, clouds appear; they build into murky thunderclouds. Fork lightning bursts across the sky, followed almost instantly by sledge-hammer thunder. On my own I toss in hurricane-force winds—thinking, what the hell—to blow the downpour across my brain like bullets, to uproot trees.
and flatten houses. In this tempest he tells me to imagine women I have loved.

Graduate School embraces me within its enclave. To earn living expenses for my second term I accept a night job in Calgary hammering together pre-fab trusses for the housing boom. A savage scrawl, seen through the dirt-streaked window of the washroom where I extract long slivers of wood from my greasy hands, signals the eruption simmering all afternoon and evening.

The guys eat their eight-o’clock lunches outside in the yard.

"Not yet," says Len, not the foreman and not the oldest, but everyone’s choice as leader. His return to his press signals the end of coffee breaks. When he rolls closed the brown paper bag he carries his tuna fish sandwiches in each day, we follow him back to work.

"Not yet," he says again. I listen and hear a rising steady roar I don’t recognize.

Lightning dings the transformer in the yard. The real foreman, an unpopular hireling from an outside competitor, dressed in oilskins and a yellow slicker, eats his lunch exiled to his forklift. He parks beneath the transformer seconds before it’s blasted into flame. Sparks shower down onto his bloated body. The raingear makes him appear inflated. The lights inside the shop sputter, then die. He races from his forklift as thunder cascades over his head. The crew—including me—convulses into laughter. Len too. The machines, fed by electricity, go down for the remainder of the shift.

"Now!" shouts Len, scooping up his lunch bag and thermos bottle. We all rush inside, squeezing through the doorway just in time.

The incessant roar grows louder as a volley of hailstones arrives from two blocks away where it has been drumming on rooftops. A torrent of ice cube-sized propellants ricochets off cars and lumber. Smaller pellets skip through the open door, their velocity shooting them against the far concrete wall as they invade the plant.

When the squall line passes over, we lean out behind Len and silently witness the pulverized ice in the yard, the sun’s reappearance below the ragged edge of the cold front, and an eerie green light. Feeble lightning flicks, followed long seconds later by the reassuring lull of soft, distant thunder and an impossible rainbow.

The atmosphere in the lecture hall sparks with the whiplash of bottled tension. This is it, my last exam. This will mark the end. It’s like a death in the family. You won’t have to deal with it.
anymore. Like a dead parent, it won’t be there when you go home at night.

The place is full of nail-biters; but I met a girl last night. She takes me home. We drink red wine and sleep on her white couch. Afterward, a peal of thunder awakens me, starts me to my feet.

She grabs my arm. "What’s wrong?"
"They told me at the hospital that if there was a storm I’d think about sex," I say, reassuring her, "but they never warned me that if I had sex first I could cause one."

Better judgement counsels me to accept a job in the Psychology Department of another university, in order to leave a girlfriend I’m close to living with. This morning the sun’s barely visible through a thick haze. It soon disappears behind a darkening bank of cloud.

The dead humidity has me praying for it.

I can’t spend another night in her apartment. We draw too close; too close. Last night the fan I bought for her room proved a great success, blowing over us while we undress, evaporating our perspiration. Her fine body warm against me; but it’s a warmth I find strangely cooling. Finally, the noise of the fan just keeps me awake all night.

I wish I could know I won’t hit her. I wish I could know that she will leave me if I do.

Lightning finally strikes the playing field, the oval track, the parking lot below. Another rattling bolt, it seems to me, jolts the flagpole. My tingling hair still bristles, even here inside where the air hums. So how can I stand so calmly at this window, my shoulder braced against the frame, my eyes sparkling as I blink them clear, while the Psych Lab vibrates and trembles, shook by sonic blasts of radiant thunder?

Light casts odd shadows in the east. Release is a relief.

What a mismatch they were: him flushed and florid, her so anemic. What could possibly have linked them?... Opposites attract, years of schooling have taught me. Lightning never strikes twice. Remember. That. Me: the Educated Man, forever apologizing to each new woman for crimes committed against the last.

The power kicks off—knocked out. The intense blackness fades to a dull gray in a deluge of pelting rain, as the tides shift.

My mother lies buried, the only real shock being that she died what they call a natural death.

My father has remarried.

Brian Burke
Blue and Green

Her favorite present is a blue glazed bowl filled with limes, like leaves curled in a palm of wave.

She touches the blue dress, sees the gray lake, but in mid-sentence she forgets his name.

Behind her, the huge trunk of a ponderosa pine disappears into long-needled branches.

In the house, upstairs, behind the chifforobe, hides a trunk filled with her dead brothers’ things:

a football trophy, several textbooks, a school annual, three photos that show how brothers can look like sons of different parents. Her father, the patriarch in a cream suit, will be dead in two years.

Her mother will live lonely with her biases. Now, surrounded by ceremony, the name of the man she hopes to love escapes her. She hears rain on a green tent in Brittany. She sees a cabin on Thompson River, blue water, she feels his strong hands. She remembers his name.

Robin Hamilton
Bumblebee

The fattest one I've seen in a month of Sundays; so close I see it's woolly, a little head with wings. How it got here—stuck between the bedroom window and screen—I can't imagine. No cracks or tears so far as either one of us can see. I'd let it out if somehow I could figure the trick it takes to unattach the screen; but letting it out means letting it in an though I spot no stinger, still, I'm, cautious, no fool for harm. I'm no soldier, no sir, but know it's tougher living in the gap: the glass so clear you can't not see what's past it, the mesh so fine the pollen drives you mad. If the rabbit dies we won't have the baby. "Don't want it," she says, like "it" was a name. My daughter or son, my no-one-to-be, how I wish we could all bumble free as we came.

Jim Simmerman
Driving the road out of town he glanced impatiently toward the cafe, watching it through shimmering air that blurred the gravel parking lot. He'd already been by here once before and now for a second time the two lane highway took him on past the cafe and the houses and trailers, out to where flat table land opened up. In the distance were the mountains; sometimes when he came out here he wished he could just keep on going, just drive away toward those mountains, but not today. Today was different. Today he had this feeling of something happening, something about to happen. It meant something that he was here at all, that he was out of the house, that it was late afternoon and he had been up and sober for hours. He stopped the car and turned it around and started back again.

She'd be surprised, not expecting to see him until she walked home and found him in front of the tv. She wouldn't expect him to show up at the cafe. But that was why he wanted to do it, he wanted to stop and wait and give her a ride like he was on his way home himself, like he hadn't done in months.

When he pulled upon the screen door she looked up with a smile beginning on her face but then had to look over to the table of customers sitting, eating. He smiled quick to show her he was ok, but she had already been distracted by the others.

A big man sat drinking coffee beneath a faded print of horses galloping. Across from him was a woman with a baby on her lap and two more kids, boys, one sitting on either side of her.

Coming in he nodded in the family's direction and went on up to the counter to sit down. She had this fan going on a low cabinet, pointing right at him but he couldn't feel a thing. For a second he just watched as she rubbed a spoon with a dish cloth, her hands completely bare except for the thin wedding band.

"It's hot out." He rested his forearms on the edge of the formica and when she continued with the dish towel he added, "I thought you might want a lift."

"I'm not closed for 25 minutes," she said and looked up and past him to the occupied table. With a single practiced motion she wiped her hands on her apron and lifted a pot of coffee off the hot plate to take around the corner.

His own wedding ring felt tight. He could only just turn it using his thumb and the side of his little finger. When she came back he told her, "I can wait." He didn't want to not talk. "I went by Frankie's. He said he might have work maybe later this week." It was true that he'd thought about seeing Frankie, but he
didn't know why he'd said this now. He would go by as soon as the weather broke. She was silent. "So how's it been?" he asked.

This got him a quick glance. "Busy."

He nodded and searched for something else to keep the conversation going. Today especially he needed to talk. "Seems pretty quite now."

"Hmm." She left him again, heading back to the table, the family, man, woman and kids.

After they'd paid up and gone and she flipped the sign in the window to say CLOSED he swept the floor for something to do, working carefully, doing it right, just sweeping and sweeping with the sweat coming under his arms and low on his back. She was busy at the counter so when he said, "Nice family," just for something to say she only looked up at him for a second. The floor was clean but he could tell that she wasn't done yet. His mouth felt dry. Through the window he saw the flashing CAFE sign and passing traffic.

When he swept dirt out over the steps he paused. It was finally beginning to cool off. The sign flashed orange, staining the hood and roof of his old car.

Standing in the evening air he imagined that this was their own place, that they were closing up their own place at the end of the day. It didn't seem like that wild a thought right then, not really. He watched the sign flashing orange, black, orange until it finally went out for good. With a last sweep of the top step he turned and went back inside.

She was wiping the counter, her white blouse dark under the arms. Strands of her hair had worked loose on her neck. When she leaned forward he saw her breasts ride up like they were straining in there and though he knew he was staring he couldn't help himself. Tonight it felt like it hadn't in months. He blinked when she looked up.

"Almost done?"

She nodded slowly, saying, "Almost" in a voice barely audible. "I'll wait outside." He propped the broom against the counter.

On his way to the door he pushed a chair in even with three others around a table.

Back outside he was grateful for the evening coolness. He felt light headed. In the quiet between passing cars he could hear the cooling tick of the turned-off sign and he thought how the heat can sometimes do things to you. The sky itself had taken on color now, dirty orange beyond the stretch of field and highway where headlights moved. He turned around when the door shut.

She was working at the lock, her legs pale in stockings and close together below the hem of a black skirt, her waist pulled small above her hips. He looked at her, knowing that he hadn't
really done so for a long time, thinking she looked pretty good. She came down off the steps digging in her purse.

He got in the car, leaned over and opened the door on her side. The engine caught on the second try and he raced it to keep it from stalling while she got in. "Warm evening."

She didn’t look over. "It’s cooling." She sat up against the door, her legs crossed.

"You bet," he said and nodded.

Gravel crunched as they drove out of the parking lot. She was looking in the mirror of her compact. Behind the car the cafe showed small and dark in the rearview, abandoned.

She peered closer at her reflection.

"I can turn on the overhead. Do you want it?" He leaned forward for the knob.

"No. Leave it off. I can see."

He left it off and sat back. There was traffic. He pulled out in front of a slow moving car and gunned it. A semi came from the opposite direction, catching him off guard and rocking the car as it passed.

"I just thought you might want a ride," he said, trying to explain. "It almost felt like we were closing up our own place." Headlights glared behind them.

She didn’t say anything.

He pulled into the gas station on the corner. "We need gas."

She looked over at him a second and then handed him some money. He got out and shut the door.

While he pumped gas he looked through the rear window. She faced straight ahead, not moving until a pickup drove in and she turned slightly to watch two men get out. She was still looking in that direction when he went to pay the cashier.

The compact was open again when he got back into the car. The engine started right up. He sat watching the gas gauge rise to almost 1/2 and then put the car in gear and drove out onto the highway. "We’re all set now. We could drive for hours." He looked over. "I almost want to just do it, go up to the mountains. Just drive on up there."

"I want to go home and go to sleep. I have to work tomorrow."

He didn’t know now about this feeling he had. "There’s a new picture in town." She did not say anything so he went on, "It’d be air conditioned."

"I’m tired."

"Sure." He nodded to show that he understood and that it was alright. "Maybe some other time."

"I don’t think so. I’m busy. And I think I’m going to be busy, you know."
He rubbed his thigh and felt his knee cap small and hard in his hand.

He turned slowly off the highway, past a limping dog hurrying along the pavement. The headlights caught it and then left it behind. When he looked over she stared straight ahead as if she hadn’t seen it at all. He could not find it in the rearview and there was nothing to say.

"I like to walk home." She opened the door while they were still rolling and was out before he could get it into park, before he could even nod. "I don’t need any rides, ok? I don’t want any rides."

Now he nodded.

She was silent a moment, holding onto the car door with one hand. Then she pulled a five dollar bill out of her pocket. "Here, enjoy your picture." She shut the door and started walking away.

He sat there in the dark not watching her and a car came around the curve, its lights making bright stars in the window.

Paul van Zwalenburg
Spider

amidst
the brazen
rhetoric
of noon
the spider
dozes

as
evening
closes
down
descends
on a
silver
thread
to the
center
of her
self
where

she
rides
athwart
solicitations
of the
wind
perilous
splendid

Robert Johnstone
An Interview: Richard Hugo

The following is a short interview with Richard Hugo, conducted by Paul Rice when Hugo was giving readings and workshops in Western North Carolina in November, 1980.

Rice In the last ten to fifteen years, poetry has gotten to be big business.

Hugo It hasn’t gotten to be big money.

Rice Everybody wants to write a poem. The lyrical instinct has come out in us. I have always been at odds to explain this especially in a decade, the seventies, when in a very real way we seem to be more Philistine than we have ever been. Can you posit any reasons?

Hugo I think we’re just a big country with a big population, and we can accommodate the Philistines and the poets both. I would put in a plug for American poetry. I’m not up on all the art forms, but I wouldn’t doubt that any art form is in better shape than American poetry. I think that good poems are being written by more good poets than at any time in our history. It seems that there must be several hundred very good poets in the United States, and well over a hundred of those are firmly established and doing a good job. For instance, I wish the art of the movie was in as good shape as American poetry.

Rice I guess this implies that we have more bad poets than ever too?

Hugo Of course there are those who try and it just doesn’t seem to be their thing.

Rice As a teacher of poetry workshops, I get a lot of poems that are obvious cries for help, poems that say, "Hey, listen to me—I hurt." I’m talking about a genre of highly personal confessional poetry which seems to have been used by writers more for therapeutic purposes than for artistic ones. I can never bring myself to tell these people what I really feel and that is that they should have left the poems under their mattress. Often the workshops have
a tendency in turning into group gropes where "I show you mine and you show me yours."

Hugo  I don’t believe in any kind of art as therapy, not the doing of it. Perhaps painting pictures in hospitals or something might be of some help, but I think of therapy as medicine. I don’t think that writing a poem is going to make oneself any healthier mentally. I think those are medical problems and would best be left to medical doctors.

Rice  In speaking of the people who want to talk about their personal life in workshop. I have never figured out what to tell them.

Hugo  In some ways, it’s not a bad impulse. There are two things that are necessary to be an artist, one is a kind of hammy instinct, a wanting to show off. I think that lies in most artists somewhere. The other is that to do it, there is a certain amount of generosity involved. I think that the best artists are quite generous by nature. So, the instinct itself to do it is not necessarily a bad thing. The only problem is that some want to satisfy that instinct quite often with a minimum of work. They want to do it directly with "oh, look at me," and not follow up with something that truly is a more creative thing.

A poem is a thing made. That’s what it means in the Greek. The cry is not enough. You have to go out and make something. If you’re not making anything, if you’re just crying out; that isn’t going to last, nor be very satisfying to the artist. The artist will always be unfulfilled.

Rice  No one would think of buying a violin and 30 days later, giving a concert. But people who have never written before will pick up a pen and expect everyone to read, and furthermore, to like it.

Hugo  Wendell Berry said something like that in Montana. He said that you would never dream of walking into a musician’s office with a violin and say, "I don’t know how to play these things but I have lots of beautiful tunes in my head, would you mind listening to them for a while?" But, they do this to poets all the time.
Rice: Have you ever told a young poet to hang it up?

Hugo: No, I would never presume to do that. You're judging the durability of the person's impulse to write, and you don't know how deep that goes. You can't ever evaluate that. A poet may look absolutely awful, but perhaps inside that poet is some resolute will to do it. That writer will stick to it for 30 years if she or he has to until he or she can do it. You don't know if that lies inside them or not.

There are, by the way, some very good writers in the United States today that probably could have been told to hang it up. I don't know about poets, but Bernard Malamud, the fiction writer, had very little talent for language, no wings so to speak. He taught freshman composition for ten years at Oregon State College. His need to write was so strong that he just sat down and taught himself to write so that he could get his fiction out. So, I would never say, "Hang it up," to anyone. That's so presumptuous. I suppose teachers can say that if they want to, but it's arrogant. I've told poets they're not writing very well, and that if they don't write better, the chances of them becoming a poet and getting anything published are almost nil. That's another matter then, I'm speaking of the things at hand. I wouldn't presume to make that profound a judgment of anybody. You just don't know what lies in people.

Rice: Where do you think that politics should enter the art of poetry?

Hugo: You mean poetic politics?

Rice: Let's try feminist politics for starters. This is a political force that has certainly helped shape poetry in the recent decade.

Hugo: I believe that anything that obsesses one, that would be feminist politics as well as triggering towns,* if the obsession is real enough, it can be accommodated by the imagination, and if they do, then certainly they're quite valid material for poetry or constitute a valid process for poetry.

I tend to think of politics as being oversimplifications, of necessity. You have to stand with this or that party; you have to take this or that stand on each issue. I think of
art as being more complex than that, that it can accommodate different shades of truth that political thinking cannot. If you get too subtle with political thinking, there would never be any results. You have to be so singular minded to get things done. That's true with feminist politics. If those engaged in it keep their eye on the ball and try to achieve true equality, then they have to ignore subtle businesses that men and women get into with each other where they alternately play roles dominating each other. Sometimes the man feels weak and wants the woman to mother him, or the woman feels weak and wants the man to father her. These things really do go on between the sexes in marriage and all the time. These things have to be overlooked in favor of the special goal that the people want.

*The Triggering Town* is Hugo's book of essays on the art of poetry. A "triggering" subject is anything which "'causes' the poem to be written."
Raymond Carver once said, "I think a little menace is fine to have in a story. For one thing, it's good for the circulation." In *Animal Care*, a fine collection of eclectic stories, Earl Ganz gives us enough tension to unblock clogged arteries. What will happen to the young Jewish woman who throws a specimen jar containing cockroach embryos down the toilet, after urinating in a city-hardened, Montana Blackfeet's bed? Will the GI with dislocated shoulders, who looks like "a tiny khaki bird twitching on the wire," survive his crucifixion by the Chinese on Korea's Million Dollar Hill? Who will stop the egomaniacal doctors from torturing both animals and humans in the name of science and progress?

While reading these stories, we often feel as though we're trapped in a German Expressionist painting, one where Franz Marc's diagonal lines of emotional energy keep cutting us off from reality, from security. Or maybe we watch characters we've known all our lives begin to explode like one of Boccioni's Futurist sculptures. By the end of the book we certainly agree with the Greek Stoic Epictetus: "No man is free who is not master of himself."

Dr. Morgenstem, the high-paid New York dentist in the ironic "Swastika Painting," loses control of his complacent life in one awful day. On his way to work, he squares off with a bigot driving an English Ford; he allows a wealthy, alcoholic patient to swill scotch with her Novocaine; he loses his temper and accidentally hits his assistant with a faulty dental spoon; he discovers the reality of being Jewish and the irony of being mistaken for a racist desecrator in front of Temple Emanuel. In the midst of this chaos, Ganz sprinkles some amazing images: "And he found himself staring at her pumpkin colored face and the pointed little teeth he had just carved." And while writing about Nazis: "In a sense it was natural they would turn up here and there, embers trying to land on something flammable, trying to catch fire again."

We learn something from these stories—how dentists shape expensive phony teeth, how to kill hapless mutts with incompetence, how young bamboo shoots can be used for torture. In "Sunshine Soldier," Ganz gives us a history lesson about Greenwich Village, how tobacco fields become boulevards for the wealthy, how smallpox forced migration to the Village, how ethnicity took hold, how drugs and music and art found a permanent home. The masochistic furniture movers in the story
represent the levels of ignorance inherent in cities where rapid changes in lifestyles are the norm, a norm that keeps people from truly understanding each other. While moving paintings for a Japanese gallery owner, the men become part of the Village’s mutability. They fight. They dance. They eat. They become a new movement in themselves, a living testimony to the transitoriness of a place like Greenwich Village.

Ganz uses complicated narration, unusual points of view, in "Animal Care," a story about those torture chambers known as animal labs. At first we think that Lena is a woman walking down a road, but we soon realize that she’s a pregnant dog about to have the hospital visit of her life. Here we get both animal and human viewpoints. This story will make you sympathize with those animal rights activists who break into labs at night, setting the victims free. Although we get messages, Ganz is never heavy-handed. In a subtle way, we being to cringe at what we’ve accepted as the underside of life. Lena and the old bitch force us to get down on four paws, to see the world from a slightly different angle.

We don’t like what we see. We’re reminded of all the gray people who inhabit offices, hospitals, university departments, government research centers. We suddenly realize that we’re lab animals too, with nothing but hope to keep us from killing ourselves or strangers on the street.

Storytelling can be dangerous. Clem and Claire Lebarge become victims of the stories they tell each other about their Bowery neighborhood in "Because We’re So Big." Under the stairs of their apartment building, a World War II deserter meets his maker in the implausible guise of a German shepherd. The story seems incredible, out of this world, something akin to what André Gide once said of Kafka’s writing: "I could not say what I admire most, the naturalistic presentation of an imaginary world, rendered believable through a minute precision of the images, or the daring turn to the mysterious." Often, Ganz hooks into a nightmare, one that flings his characters and readers over the viable parameters of the world.

"The Monk of the Bitter Cucumber," my favorite story in the collection, reminds me of those old Chinese meditational landscapes, the ones you focus on for hours, trying to enter the bamboo forest with the old monk, crossing arched bridges, smelling lotus blossoms, transcending distances and anguish. This is a story about creation, about writing and painting, about inspiration, about the great artists who’ve lived before us. The French painter Jean Dubuffet always sprinkled a little dust or sand in his ink, so he would be closer to the formless, the common, that which continuously exists. He said, "What the paper attracts exists, only it has never been seen before." In the story, three unlikely characaters
interact to produce a Chinese landscape in the manner of an ancient Ch’ing master: Mr. Weiss, who wants to buy an apartment building; the janitor of that building, who also paints; and Tao Chi, the dead master who exists in his book, the *Hua Yu Lu*. Ganz does a wonderful job, maneuvering the events leading up to the completion of the painting, illuminating the experience of creating art in an almost surrealistic manner.

Like Dubuffet, Ganz appreciates the truth in what the old master says about art: "'In the sea of ink is the divine essence. Life must be brought in at the point of the brush. The single brush stroke is the origin of all existence.'" This is also true of writing.

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**Keith Abbott, *Downstream from Trout Fishing in America: A Memoir of Richard Brautigan***

*Capra Press, 1989*

Reviewed by David Curran

Even if you hate Brautigan, or consider him a minor writer, *Downstream from Trout Fishing in America* is a source of unique insight into literary fame and its effect on an individual. The book is not in any way a complete biography of Brautigan. It is biographical in part but is also a collection of Abbott’s memories of Richard, coupled with some deep insight into why Richard wrote what he wrote. It even includes criticism of Brautigan’s work and a look at the criticism of Brautigan’s work.

Although I found the criticism section of little interest and resented it when Abbott abandoned Richard to talk about his own life, Abbott’s knowledge of Richard’s rise to fame and his insight into Brautigan, the man, are well worth reading.
At the various interstices of ordinary events and the imaginary dwell such things as escape the arbitrary and monotonous flow of daily life, such things as angels come to earth, foxes sporting floral gloves, and bodies sprouting pearls. And it is to these intersections that Lynda Sexson follows her characters in their search for meaning. Her collection of short stories, Margaret of the Imperfections, explores the same sort of intrusion of the bizarre or eruption of the once-hidden that delights readers of Eudora Welty through the same sort of uniquely personal vision of the world reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor’s good country people. This is not to say her stories are derivative because, in the nexus of these two aspects of some of America’s best fiction, Sexson finds her own voice, powerful in its poetic imagination and lyric sensibility.

In the opening story, Evelyn becomes convinced that her long-standing-bachelor brother has become engaged to the angel of their childhood secrets. She observes his fiancée eating lilac blossoms while birds fly through her. This could be interpreted as simply the hallucination of a sister jealous for an idealized fraternal love that she seems to be losing, but Sexson’s sensitivity to her character allows Evelyn’s vision a wholeness and verity of its own, drawing a perfect tension between the two realities.

The title story, in which Margaret begins to produce perfect pearls from her flesh, also veers into the so called ‘magic realism.’ But perhaps more important than the miracle of the pearls is the discovery it leads to, a discovery that emerges from the human psyche just as the pearls erupt from her flesh.

Discovery illuminates the interiors of all Sexson’s characters, interiors so well explored in this collection. Not all the stories incorporate the magical, but each involves the uncovering of a past hidden in the evolution of the character’s inner landscape, hidden in the construction of his or her unique reality. Some of these hidden pasts are as mundane and worldly as long-forgotten jewel thefts, illicit loves and murder. What lends them their sense of otherworldliness is the transformative power of the individual imagination; each story bravely enters the imaginary of its characters to give the reader a unique world, like a palimpsest, laid over the recognizable events of the quotidian. Where these two
intersect, the reader finds the very personal lexicon each character has developed for his or her life.

Perhaps, Lynda Sexson's lyrical language arises from these same crossroads. One passage from "Ice Cream Birth," in a letter from Korea, flows out of a uniquely poetic observation:

Every shop has a charming wrap, and every sale is completed as a kind of celebration, confusing commerce and presents...even a pair of socks from Eastgate—from a woman whose stall is the size of our closet in the old house, and whose entire inventory is socks. She forgives me, I feel, all that is grotesque in my life and hers; as she wraps the socks, she gives them to me so I am not guilty of purchase. And she returns, to herself and to me, all our dignity.

Another passage from "Foxglove" illustrates wonderfully the blend of imaginary and daily in a wholly poetic language:

I have three fingers suited up in fox-glove blossoms, when I notice the factor of time on the stalks. The bells ascend the shafts in a sequenced pattern of ripeness. The lowest corollas are already withered, the uppermost are yet green-globed futures. Past, present, future. The foxglove spires cluster their notations on time. Counting on their fingers. Digitalis. Hurrying the hearts contemplating death.

Passages of this sort are far from rare and often the simplest description turns out a surprisingly beautiful flow of words. Not all Sexson's character's are so witty in their observations, but each is alive with the will and imagination to turn question to answer. As Cathryn, from "Foxglove," observes, "to hear it wrong, in order to have the freedom to make it up, is the only escape from commonplace time."
Lee Evans, *The Fisherman's Widow*, Frontier Award Committee, Garden City Printing, 1989

Reviewed by Cindy Linse

It's easy to see why the chapbook of Lee Evans, The Fisherman's Widow won the Miriam Frontier Award; it contains not only the depth but also the rollicking fun of being. The title is taken from a piece in a poem sequence of varied narrative points-of-view, entitled "The Peasant Paintings from Zhejiang." The sequence is a form Evans is fond of using and works with well, perhaps because one of her most powerful tools is her ability to spread out like grassroots from a central subject or central subjectivity and work in all directions making connections.

Like the fisherman's widow captured in the crystallized colors of her grief, many of Evans' poems deal with mourning a lost father that is both real and figural, that was lost both before and after death's arrival. In a favorite of mine along this vein, "Wearing Your Sweater," Evans writes both of loss and of the need to make connections:

...So hard, slipping into the pale wave of your thoughts.
No different in death, you were always far away.

Her predilection for covering a subject from a variety of viewpoints is also indicative of another sentiment strong in Evans' poetry: that longing for the closeness of seeing it all through another's eyes, longing for closeness at the bone-level, as in the "Disappearing Lady" who zips herself "into your skin/to be close to your demons." Evans covers the terrible price of closeness as well, and the "disappearing lady's" "legs pop out of their babydoll sockets/then walk away in disgust." Several of the poems touch the impossibility of this closeness, too, as does "In This Room," where father sits in a wicker chair:

I grasp the barbed arm of his chair
and lean away from him,
the little sticks hurting my hands,
my hands already learning his silence.

But not all the poems plumb such depths and Evans isn't above playing in the garden. In another poem sequence, "The Secret Lives of White Moon Flowers and Other Miracles in the Garden," one sees the Reagan/Bush era in the person of "Emperor Broccoli," who has "nearly convinced them/that one of his spongy heads actually functions/that the Red Acre Cabbage is plotting against
him." Evans daringly flaunts that Victorian convention which prohibits the discussion of politics at the dinner table; so readers should be aware, after reading a poem such as this one, political discussion is likely to arise at the next dinner party where broccoli is served. Or beets, like the "Ruby Queen Beet," who we are urged to call a Bolshevik, who will "keep a nation in soup with the sweet flesh of her roots." I'm sure nobody has had more fun with those silly names they put on seed packets than Lee Evans. And I'm glad I've had the opportunity to share in the fun, the grief and the impossible longing, to make connections with the Snap Dragon, who "returns you to a world you never left/to the satin soil, which ripples ever so gently/beneath you."
Contributor's Notes

Zann Bockes partially grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, and received a BA in English and a BFA in creative writing from the University of Nebraska, Omaha. She is currently working on her MFA at the U of M.

Don Boes holds an MFA from Indiana. He has held residencies at the MacDowell Colony and Ragsdale and currently works as a technical writer in Louisville.

Brian Burke is a Canadian writer whose work appears in Oberon Press's annual collection of new writing Coming Attractions: Magazine and Cross Canada Writer's Magazine, respectively.

Don Bunse has an MFA from the University of Washington and teaches art at the U of M. He was one of the originators of the collagraph technique.


Ann Cummins teaches creative writing at Northern Arizona University. Her fiction has appeared in Best of the West, Antioch Review, Quarterly West, and The New Yorker. She is currently working on a novel.

Debi Kang Dean lives in North Carolina. Her work has appeared in Tar River Poetry. Her son David foiled the plans of an individual who kept bringing the same unopened coconut to countless writer's pot luck dinners; he brought a hammer.

Stephen Dobyns teaches in the creative writing program at Syracuse University. His most recent book of poems Body Traffic will be published this fall by Viking-Penguin.

Denise Duhamel has been published in numerous journals and has also won a N.Y. State Foundation for the Arts Fellowship.

Earl Ganz, who teaches creative writing at the University of Montana, was born in Brooklyn and came to Montana in 1966. A graduate of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, his first collection of short stories Animal Care will appear this spring.

Robin Hamilton teaches English at Hellgate High in Missoula.
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David Lanner has had photo exhibitions in Oklahoma; San Antonio, Texas; Taipae, Taiwan; Los Angeles; Cedar City, Utah; Rochester, New York and other places.

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Jim Simmerman has published three books of poetry and directs the creative writing program at Northern Arizona.

Deborah Slicer lives in Greenwood, Virgnia and has new work forthcoming in The Hampdon-Sydney Poetry Reveiw and Ms. Magazine.

Paul Van Zwalenburg was born and raised in Hawaii, schooled in Colorado and Rhode Island and now lives in Seattle. His work has appeared in Bamboo Ridge, Hawaii.

Boyd White has been poetry Editor of the Iowa Review and has new work forthcoming in Prairie Schooner.
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IN PREPARATION
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In this other part of the forest,
where the most savage flowers bloom—
you never thought you'd find this place again—
sing because you want to live forever

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