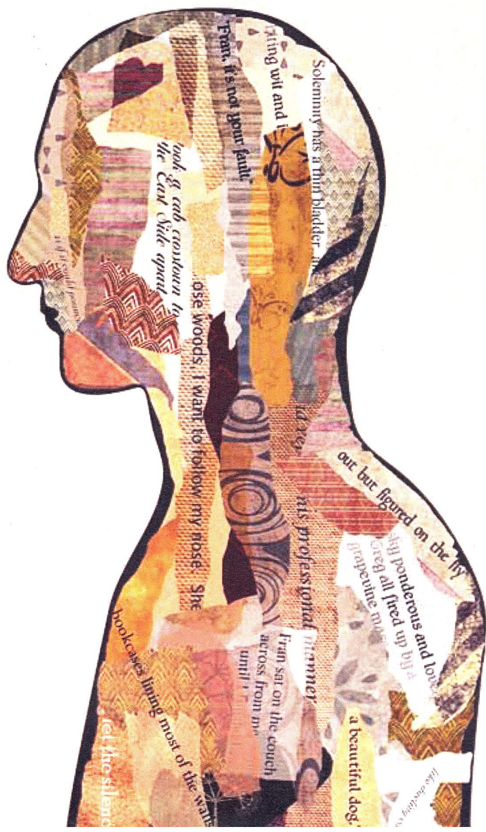
Alabama Literary Review



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Editor
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Fiction Editors
Jim Davis
Theron Montgomery

Poetry Editor
Patricia Waters

Webmaster
Ben Robertson

Cover Design
Brigid Kathleen Sturgeon

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ALR

M. C. ALLAN

Piñata

A tinny electronic witch-cackle trickled from above the door frame as Sahana went into Balloonatics. Inside, the store smelled like latex and French fries, and Sahana walked tentatively between the figures flanking the entrance—life-size mannequins in need of dusting: a genie, a witch, a man in a green-and-red sweater with a mask of burns and knives for fingers. Sahana knew he was a murderer of children from a movie. Jimi had been sneakily watching it the week before, pretending to watch the baseball game, but every time she had passed carrying laundry, she could hear scary music until Jimi would sense her behind him and switch channels.

"Divyesh would not want you watching this?" she had said. She could not keep the question from her voice. "I watch stuff like this all the time," he'd said, not turning to look at her, his skinny legs ending in huge sneakers stretched toward the screen. "You don't know what I watch."

And this was true: She did not know. She had taken the basket out of the room and finished sorting the laundry: jeans, t-shirts, men's boxers and boy's briefs, some printed on the waistbands with the red mask and blank eyes of Spiderman.

Party supplies, Divyesh had said. Maybe a baseball theme. More difficult than her usual chores, involving visits to new stores and conversations with strangers. But she had already found orange and black napkins, and paper plates with the Giants logo, and now there was the paper baseball in the window at Balloonatics. The girl clerk was eating fries from Wendy's. She put two in her mouth and stared at Sahana, her pink cell phone tucked under her chin. She had a

bright red streak in her hair and a silver hoop through her eyebrow. Sahana waited politely, reading the messages on the balloons tied near the register, testing herself: Happy Birthday, Get Well. One black balloon lettered in dripping white text mystified her: Over the Hill.

"No way," the girl said into the phone. "You have got to be shitting me."

"Excuse me please?" Sahana finally said.

The girl raised her eyebrows. "How much is this?" Sahana asked, pointing to the baseball in the window. The girl mouthed twenty.

Sahana went to look closer. The baseball was made of white crepe paper, wrapped around an inner structure. A red ribbon of stitches was threaded into the paper itself, curling around the sphere. It rotated slowly in the dim afternoon sun. Sahana reached to lift it and was surprised by its lightness. She could see it already, the centerpiece of the table.

She went back to the register. "I will buy it," she said to the girl, who raised her finger for Sahana to wait.

"Yeah," the girl said into the phone. "Yeah, he's being a giant asshole. Can you hang on?" She put her fingers over the phone. "I can give you five dollars off if you buy the candy too. But you have to buy at least two pounds. Five-ninety-nine a pound."

"Candy?"

"Back there," the girl flapped her hand toward the back of the store. "Yeah, I'm here," she said into the phone.

Sahana gripped her purse-strap and walked towards the wall, where radiant plastic silos of candy stood gleaming. She recognized a few—squares of Ghirardelli chocolate, discs of butterscotch, the silver-foil chocolates called kisses. At the cocktail party a few months before, there had been many kinds of candy set out in bowls. Sahana had planted herself near one while Divyesh mingled, though he kept coming back to check on her, placing his hand on her shoulder to introduce her to people who worked at his company.

At first the other guests just circled around smiling, but then a man and woman came up to talk to her, asking how she liked San Francisco, was this her first time in the States, had she been to the Taj Mahal.

Later one woman slid over, clinking the ice cubes in her glass and leaning in close. She had a short haircut and her bangs had been pinched into sharp teeth across her forehead. She kept smiling at Sahana, a smile that felt like pity. She kept saying how difficult it had been for Jimi and "Div," looking at Divyesh across the room, and Sahana, following her gaze, watched her new husband hovering over the shrimp puffs and cheese tarts. His hand hovered and pulled back, reached and stopped again, until finally it descended and plucked up a baby carrot. He ate it in a series of tiny bites.

"She was so young, you know," the woman sighed. "So pretty and funny. I cried my eyes out. It just shows, you have to feel your boobies! All the women in my family bite the big one early." She wiggled her shoulders as if to free herself from the thought. "Anyway, I kept telling Div he had to get back in the saddle," she said. "That's what I did, when my husband left. You can't sit around and mope." Sahana didn't understand all her words, but she saw the way the woman looked at Divyesh, and the way Divyesh looked back. Sahana retreated to the bowl of candy: small disks of mint and dark chocolate wrapped in foil. Eating them kept her mouth full so that when others approached her to ask questions, she could point to her mouth and smile while she figured out the words to make up her reply.

There were slots at the bottoms of the silos of candy and scoops to rake them out. Sahana glanced over at the cashier, who had finally hung up. Sahana unfolded a plastic bag and scooped a few peanut cups into it.

The cashier wandered over slowly, her hands in the pockets of her store apron. "Do you need help?"

"Yes please," said Sahana.

The girl took the bag and leaned over to scoop more peanut cups. "What else do you want?"

Sahana did not know what candies Jimi and Divyesh liked. "Have you … I think they are named peppermint pats?"

"You mean peppermint patties? Yeah. Not York though," the girl said, scanning the silos. It sounded like it was bad to not be York, but what was York? It sounded like yuck, which Jimi had explained the week she'd arrived, when she was looking at the cleaners under the kitchen sink. Some had stickers on them shaped like green frowning faces. Jimi said, That's Mr. Yuck. They make those to tell retards from India not to drink the Windex.

The girl scooped silver-wrapped disks into the bag. "That's about a pound—what else?" Her eyes were a deep, kohl-ringed green and Sahana did not want to see pity blossoming there. It was the same look Radha—with her quick hands and loud mouth—had given her when Sahana had come to the school where they taught and told her: The man I told you about wants to marry me.

"How about jellybeans?" the salesgirl suggested. "Kids love these—they have lots of weird flavors." She reached into one of the canisters and put a small green candy in Sahana's hand. "Here, try this."

Sahana put the candy into her mouth. She bit down and a strong peppery flavor flooded across her tongue. She winced in surprise—she knew the flavor, but then it dissolved into a chewy sugar and vanished.

"That's jalapeno," said the girl, grinning. "These things are a trip. Here, try these two together." She dropped a green and a red into Sahana's hand, and Sahana obediently chewed them up. "That's green apple and cinnamon together."

"Yes, I will take some," Sahana said, and the girl pulled out another bag and went along the canisters scooping out portions of each color—grayish green, bright green with

yellow spots, cream with brown flecks. Sahana admired the red stripe in her hair. She was kinder than she had first seemed, and something in her words made Sahana feel how easy it would be, one day, to speak English. She would not even have to think; it would be automatic, like swallowing food.

"Please," she said suddenly, pointing to the black balloon near the register, "can you tell me, that balloon, what is the meaning?"

"Which one?" the girl asked, turning. "Oh, over the hill? It means old. People give it as a joke. It's like saying your life is over and soon you'll be dead." She lifted the two bags of candy. "OK, I think that'll do it."

Tossed in together, the jellybeans looked like jewels. Sahana imagined them sitting in glass bowls in the back yard with the sun shining through them. The girl picked one from the bag. "Here—you gotta try this, it's the weirdest one." Before Sahana could protest, she had pushed a light-yellow bean into her mouth. For a moment Sahana tasted the girl's fingers, a trace of lotion, but when she bit down her mouth flooded with popcorn. It made her think of the theater where she and Radha used to see movies, Bollywood hits and ones from America. When they were little there was one with Robert Redford where he played a baseball player shot by a crazy woman. Afterward Radha talked about how people in American movies always shot each other for no reason. But what Sahana remembered came later in the movie, when the man hit a ball so hard that it smashed the lights over the field and made sparks fall, yet the baseball just kept on going, as though it had infinite space.

Before Sahana was born, her father had gone to visit a cousin in Arizona, and many times he'd told her about the Grand Canyon, a hole in the earth big enough to hold a sea. She begged again and again to see his pictures. Every time he told her about standing on the edge with the sun coming over the stone, she felt the space pouring into her. She only asked

him to tell her the story when they were alone. If her sisters and her mother and the ladies in her uncle's shop in Chandni Chowk heard it, she knew they would get into the space and fill it up.

Many years later, when her father introduced her to Divyesh, Sahana did not really see Divyesh Singh, widower and father, his prominent eyes behind his glasses underlined with crescents of sweat. She heard that he lived in America and from there saw only the canyon, layers of light and rock in her father's photos, cleaner than the smoggy sunsets over Delhi. When her father told her that Divyesh's family wanted him to remarry, the words were like a package she had eagerly been expecting.

§

But in San Francisco it rained most of the time, and the streets filled up with fog. The sunlight that came through was pale and damp, like something that lived in a cave. Divyesh was more silent than he had seemed in Delhi, his son was a terrible, cruel boy, and the English lessons she had daydreamed through had not prepared her for how it was spoken here, quickly and with mysterious inflections. The house they lived in was small and modern, so close to the next house that Jimi could climb out onto the roof and pee on the tiny herb garden that belonged to their lady neighbor. Divyesh did not know he did this, but Sahana had seen the streams arcing past the kitchen window. The lady next door, a stout Latina who worked on the city council, thought that the urine smell was due to homeless people passing through the alley. She had left a note recently, asking them to report strangers they saw.

A few weeks after Sahana arrived, Divyesh taught her to drive his little Toyota, guiding her slowly around the streets. He showed where to catch the streetcar, and the grocery store where she could buy Jimi's terrible foods—noo-

dles with orange powder, cereal shaped like letters, trays holding frozen rafts of brown meat and potatoes. Once he had provided instructions on the care and feeding of his son, Divyesh withdrew. He worked long hours at a software company and was usually not home until after nine. He seemed pleased to find a clean house when he arrived, but his expression when he saw Sahana was always mildly puzzled, as though he'd arrived to find the furniture had been moved just slightly.

In the evenings Sahana watched television in their bedroom and the boy watched television in his. Even once he got home, Divyesh would often continue working; she would feel the weight of his body sink the bed late in the night. She had been frightened about sleeping in bed with a man, about what he would do to her. But as months passed and he showed no interest in anything but sleep, she began to think he would never do anything at all.

In the mornings she would set out Jimi's cereal and make coffee. She now knew that Divyesh liked his coffee black, that he slept on his back with his hands clasped against his stomach as though it hurt him, that he did not snore. When he was home, he often stared into space; Sahana frequently had to repeat her questions about which food to purchase or how to get to the library. She came to prefer looking on the Internet; when he did not answer her, she felt as though her voice might be only in her head. The houses around them were so close, and yet no one ever came to visit. If there was a fire, if someone came to rob them and she called for help, would anyone hear?

Everywhere she moved in the house, she brushed against Divyesh's dead wife. Ambuja had been small and slim, with a cheerful face and stylish hair tinted burgundy. To Sahana, she looked impossibly American. She had cooked a turkey at Thanksgiving—there were pictures of a glistening roast in the family album—and cheered at Jimi's baseball games and attended meetings with his teachers. She

had died nearly three years ago, yet sometimes when Sahana opened doors in the house, she felt as though Ambuja might speak, a voice out of the mayonnaise jar or a giggle from one of Jimi's baseball cleats. Strands of her hair still appeared in nooks and crannies of the house. Sahana battled the hair with the snout of the vacuum cleaner, but tiny tumbleweeds returned, sliding across the hallway floor or drifting down from the top of the refrigerator when Sahana dusted.

In the hours while Divyesh was at work and Jimi was at school, Sahana took walks around the neighborhood. There was a bakery at the corner of Stockton and Filbert where she would buy raisin bread and sit in Washington Square and nibble hour by hour, reading American romance novels and writing emails to her mother and to Radha. She wrote about learning to drive and how empty the streets were but still everyone complained about the traffic. She made the mistake of mentioning Ambuja's hair to her mother, who wrote back that the wife's jealous ghost must be in the house. You must encourage your husband to offer rice; it is late but perhaps it will be accepted. The thought of suggesting this ritual to Divyesh—while he was downloading the latest security patch or reading baseball scores in the morning paper—made Sahana wish Radha were there to laugh with her. Radha would make a joke of it; she was always able to tilt a moment that teetered between bitter and sweet in the better direction. Radha would understand: It was Sahana who felt like a ghost.

Every day, Sahana walked the steep streets and alleys. She suspected she had come to know the neighborhood better than Divyesh and Jimi, who had lived there for years. She knew the large red dog with the pointed ear that stood against its fence and barked, the rundown apartments where a sign in a second-story window advertised, in blue curlicue letters, "Madame Mona, fortune/ massage/ taxes/ BILINGUAL," the yards thick with flowers and birdbaths

where she often saw green parrots splashing. They looked like parrots she'd seen around Delhi. The man at the bakery said they had escaped from a crate at the airport and made themselves at home. Sahana felt sorry for them, gaudy and freakish even in the lush little gardens. But she felt sorrier for herself: the parrots had each other, a group to chatter with. She had an empty house, the creeping hair of a dead woman, and a man and a boy living in separate worlds, too far away to help her find her way through this one.

§

She had hidden the party supplies in the bedroom closet, but took them out when Divyesh got home. He needed a haircut; pieces of gray were growing in over his ears. Sahana felt the energy of her day drain from her, but she smiled deliberately as she laid out the bounty on the bed. She saved the paper baseball for last. He smiled when he saw it. "You found some great stuff," he said, lifting the baseball and tossing it upwards. "Jimi's will love the piñata."

"Pen-yatta? That is the name?" she asked.

Divyesh nodded. "They're big at kid's parties," he said. She looked at the hair over his ears and thought I could cut it. She had cut her father's hair; she had liked the feel of it in her fingers and the scissors' soft creak against each strand. Her father had made a big fuss about how much money she saved him. She knew it was just twenty rupees, but she liked that he acted like it was more. It seemed something she should offer her husband, but she said nothing. It was one thing to lie in bed as they slept, but to stand close with both of them awake, with her hands on the back of his neck—no. Even the light touch he gave her now, putting his hand on her shoulder to guide her downstairs into the kitchen, did not feel comfortable.

Jimi was staring at wrestlers on TV and drawing elaborate figures with his finger in the ketchup and mustard

that had dripped from his hot dog. “Are you looking forward to your birthday?” Divyesh asked Jimi, pulling a granola bar from the cabinet and putting a cup of water in the microwave for tea.

Jimi shrugged but didn’t take his eyes from the television. “I guess. Paul’s coming.”

“And Tina, too, right?” said Divyesh. He glanced at Sahana and his left eye made a strange motion, as though it had meant to wink conspiratorially but remembered in time who it would be winking at.

Sahana made the words in her head. “I have brought decorations for your party.”

“Bought, not brought,” Jimi said. “Besides, my dad bought them. You don’t have any money.”

At least once a day Sahana reminded herself that he had lost his mother and was to be pitied.

“Jimi,” Divyesh said, “Sahana has been out all day looking for stuff for your party.”

The shrug again. The microwave beeped and Divyesh pulled his mug out and added a bag of chamomile tea. “Well, I am happy to look forward to it,” Sahana said brightly. “I am going to prepare a very good meal.”

“That’s wonderful,” Divyesh said, his voice like a flash of mirror from a far-off hill. “What are you going to make?”

“I am going to make naan and rice and maybe pakoras and raita for the side, but for the main dish I am make something very wonderful,” she said, picturing the rolling, fragrant bubbles bursting in the orange velvety sauce, Divyesh and Jimi delighted, the other mothers envious. “It is called murgh makhani.”

Divyesh nodded. “I haven’t had that in years. There’s a restaurant near work that makes it, but it’s not very good.”

“And I am thinking now,” Sahan said, realizing with delight, “it is even orange and black, like the Giants!”

“No way,” Jimi said, shaking his head emphatically.

"I don't want nasty Indian food. My friends'll be grossed out."

"Do you even know what it is?" Divyesh said, frowning.

"I know I won't like it," Jimi said.

Sahana saw Divyesh's face tighten, and for a moment saw what he might have been before his wife's death: a father who would correct his son's rudeness. "Jimi, murgh makhani is chicken in tomato sauce. It's good—you'll like it."

"I want pizza," Jimi said. "We can order pizzas from Cybelle's and it'll be great."

"You can have pizza any time."

"I don't care," Jimi said sullenly. "That curry stuff looks like diarrhea. Deepak Napesh, his family eats that food. The kids at school talk about how he smells."

Sahana inhaled, more surprised than hurt. Divyesh's eyes flicked from Sahana to Jimi. "Jim, you need to go to your room."

"Fine," Jimi said, stomping into the kitchen, where he dropped his plate into the sink with a clatter. "Mom would've let me. But it's only my birthday—why should it matter what I want?" He flew up the stairs. The ceiling above shuddered as his body landed on his bed.
Divyesh sighed. "Ignore him. Make what you planned," he said. "I'm sure it will be very good."

He patted the table gently, like a pet, then took his tea upstairs to his office. One of the wrestlers on television hit the other with a chair and fireworks came shooting out of the corners of the mat. Sahana remembered: how her mother had always smelled of the buttery ovals of puri she made during the day. Her father smelled of the leather chair he sat in. Radha smelled like the children she taught—sometimes sweet, sometimes sour and milky. But if you ate foods different than everyone else, it must be different. It must get into your pores. She remembered the first time she had met

Divyesh in her father's office in Delhi. She had noticed his smell—not a bad smell, not strong, but different, as though his hair and clothes and skin had been scrubbed in strange bread and meat. Even dressed in a kurta and pants, anyone standing close would have known he did not belong there.

§

The morning of the party, Sahana walked, the route familiar, the adrenaline of her nervousness carrying her to the green space below Coit Tower. The fog was light on the bay; in the distance she could see the twin peaks of the bridge rising from the mist like fins. When she returned to the house it was nearly nine-thirty; there was a note from Divyesh that he and Jimi had gone to pick up the cake and would be back before the party started.

Sahana began cooking. She minced the onions and ginger and peppers, adding garam masala she had blended, blanching tomatoes and sliding off their skins, adding the pieces of the tandoori chicken she had cooked beneath the broiler the day before. Soon she had rice pulau pillowing in the oven, dotted with cloves and peas and cashews, and dough for naan puffing up like a balloon. She minced the coriander, inhaling its soapy scent as it mixed with the sauce simmering on the stove. She stirred the simmering pot, moving the chicken around and releasing a sweet, warm wave of scent: tomatoes, ginger, butter.

She had set out plates and placed the baseball centerpiece and bowls of candy on the picnic table in the backyard when she heard the doorbell. The clock on the microwave read 11:56. She went to the radio to turn down the volume on the Giants game, then went to the door, her face moist from the steam of the kitchen.

There was a woman on the step, vaguely familiar, wearing a dress that seemed to have ties everywhere—under her breasts, at her waist, up the arms—and a silk scarf at her

throat. She was short and curvy with short slick hair and a smile full of teeth and eagerness. Sahana thought perhaps she was an Avon lady; one had come by the house a few weeks earlier. This woman had the same bright look of interest, as if she had no wish for anything but Sahana's happiness.

"Hello?" Sahana said, offering a smile.

"Hi there!" the woman said. "I'm Charlie Brennan, remember? Sahannah? We met at the office party a while back? I'm a friend of Divyesh's—my son Jason goes to school with Jimi?"

Boobies. Back in the saddle. The sharp points of hair across her forehead. Sahana remembered. "Oh—you are here for the party!" She stepped back, still confused. "You are before time."

Charlie laughed. "Early! Yes, guilty as charged. I came to help! Divyesh asked me to help. That's my son Jason." She pointed towards a minivan, where a dark-haired boy in a t-shirt was pulling a gift wrapped in blue and red paper from the back seat.

"Oh," Sahana said, stepping back to let them in. "That is kind! Come in please."

"Let me just run out and get our things," Charlie said. She patted the boy as he passed her into the house, his arms wrapped awkwardly around Jimi's present. Sahana watched as Charlie clicked down the walk to the minivan and opened the back. She stood up balancing two large plastic-wrapped platters. She came back smiling and swept into the house, the little ties on her dress fluttering. The platters, Sahana saw, held sandwiches and fried chicken.

Sahana followed her to the kitchen, her brain racing for words. "Oh, I am not—you did bring food? I made this morning food for the party?"

"That's okay," Charlie sang, bobbing her head back and forth. "Jimi mentioned that you might need some help. You can never have too many munchies for these things."

She set the platters down and went back past Sahana, smiling her dimpled smile.

Sahana went to the stove. She picked up the spoon and slowly stirred the bubbling pot of red sauce. “These are such cute decorations!” Charlie exclaimed as she came back, carrying a platter of brownies and several bags of potato chips. “I love the baseball. Shall I get it set up for you once I put the food out?” She patted Sahana’s shoulder. “I can’t believe you tried to cook! You’re too sweet! I always go to Whole Foods for parties. They make great chicken.”

Sahana saw clearly: With the platters on the table, there would be no room for the rice and plates of naan she had envisioned, the pot in the center. She would have to serve the chicken in the kitchen and bring it out plate by plate. She set the spoon down onto the stovetop. Red sauce pooled around it.

She went upstairs slowly to the bedroom, trying to control her fury. She stood at the window and watched Charlie setting the napkins and paper plates around the table. The paper baseball sat in the center. The gray light of the overcast day seemed to make the baseball glow whiter. She knew she should go get the naan into the oven, but she didn’t feel like going back downstairs to smile and nod and pull the dough into loaves.

She heard the front door open: Divyesh and Jimi returning with the cake. She listened: running feet, the sliding door opening. Then in the back yard: “Hi, Charlie!”

“Hello, birthday boy!”

“Oh yeah, you brought brownies! Hey, Jason.”

Sahana heard footsteps on the stairs. She turned her back. She heard the door open but she kept watching the backyard, blinking carefully. Jimi was peeling back plastic wrap on the brownies.

“What’s going on?” Divyesh asked.

Sahana shrugged. Why was he asking her?

“Sahana, please come speak to me,” Divyesh said.

Sahana turned to look at him. Her face made him take a step back. "When did they get here?"

"Ten minutes before," she said.

"What did she say?"

"You ask her to come early. Jimi tells her to bring food."

Divyesh's eyes narrowed. "Goddammit. Jimi." He half turned toward the bedroom door, then turned back. "Sahana, I did not ask that woman to come early. Sometimes Jimi—" Anger had sharpened his features, and with the arrival of his anger, hers vanished. Its departure made her feel almost regretful: For perhaps the first time since her arrival, she and Divyesh had been united in a feeling. "Really," he said. "Give me five minutes—I'll get her out of here."

"No, no," Sahana said, stretching her hand out to stop him. She could imagine the results: Jimi pouting as other children arrived, Charlie telling Divyesh's colleagues how his new wife had forced him to break up a children's party over food. "Let Jimi to have his party," she said. "This is what he wanted."

"But you've been working all morning," Divyesh protested.

"It does not matter. You will bring it to work. It will be leftover." They turned together to look out the window. Charlie was standing near the table, holding the paper baseball and laughing as she watched Jimi roll pieces of brownie into little balls and toss them into Jason's mouth.
"I don't want him to get the idea that this is OK," Divyesh said. "Or her. She is full of herself. She is a crazy woman. She once put a pair of underwear in my mailbox at work."

Sahana giggled. The thought of Charlie leaving underwear in Divyesh's mailbox amazed her; it was like something in a movie.

Divyesh glared. "It's not a joke. They had kittens on them."

"I am sorry," Sahana said, composing her face. "But do not make her go. It will embarrass her. And Jimi hates I am here already."

The doorbell rang but no one in the yard moved to answer. "I should get the door," Divyesh said. He hesitated, turned towards the stairs. His hand moved to his hair and grabbed a bunch of curls, silver and black hair entwined with the tight hooks of his knuckles. "I think you are a very kind person," he said, and turned down the stairs.

In a few seconds he reappeared in the yard below with new guests, a man and woman and a girl. He gestured them toward the candy and then stepped toward Charlie. He took her by the elbow and led her to the corner of the yard. His mouth was a straight, sharp line, barely open, as though he had a torrent of words but was releasing only a trickle. Charlie's face cramped into a pout. Full of herself. It was a good phrase: Sahana imagined Charlie overflowing with Charlie, so full to the brim with Charlie that there was no room for anything else. But she felt ashamed. She had come here to fill herself in just such a manner, to find a space, but had found her space filled with this unhappy man and his son. Her stomach clenched and she settled herself on the bed. She could hear more people arriving—the doorbell rang and the noise from the yard grew, kids' voices drifting up. She could hear Charlie telling people to help themselves to foods. She settled her face into the coolness of her pillow. A few minutes later she opened her eyes to see Divyesh coming in, carrying a tray of the food she had made. He set it on the rug near the bed, and sat cross-legged before it and spooned the rice onto two plates. Sahana joined silently, watching as he ladled chicken and red sauce over the rice. He spooned some raita onto his plate, and then handed her a jar. Sahana took it, surprised. She had not been able to find lime pickle.

"I picked it up after we got the cake—there's a place on Valencia you can get all sorts of stuff," Divyesh said. "I'll

show you this weekend." He speared a bite of chicken and put it in his mouth. "Wow. Good."

"Thank you," Sahana said.

"I'll get the naan," he said, moving to get to his feet, but Sahana put her hand on his knee, lightly.

"Let me get it," she said. She went downstairs into the kitchen. In the oven, the ovals of bread had puffed up nicely and she pulled them from the rack onto a small plate. Outside the back door, kids and parents were milling about, and Jimi was talking to a girl. Something looked strange about him. She thought perhaps his hair seemed spikier, but then she realized it was the first time she had seen him around other children. His eyes and mouth were relaxed; he seemed like another boy, one she had not yet met. She felt like a spy, but there was no embarrassment in it. She was pleased to see what he'd been concealing: he was capable of happiness. Charlie and another woman were saying something, moving around the kids as though herding geese. Sahana couldn't figure out what they were doing, but she suddenly noticed that Charlie had moved the baseball from the table. It was now hanging from a tree branch like a chandelier. It looked good there, Sahana had to admit, spinning mid-air. The kids were gathering around it, laughing and pointing as Charlie untied the scarf she'd been wearing around her neck. She moved, shaking her hips like a dancing girl, fluttering the scarf in front of her face—full of herself!— to where Jimi was talking to one of the girls. She said something that made him roll his eyes, but he grinned widely when Charlie slipped the scarf over his eyes and knotted it behind his head. What was she doing? Everyone was laughing.

"Divyesh?" she called up the stairs. There was no answer. Outside, the kids were watching Jimi as he shifted blindly back and forth beneath the tree. Charlie stepped away, clapping, and bent over to pick up something at her feet. It wasn't until Jimi stepped out further into the center of

the circled group that Sahana saw that Charlie had handed him his baseball bat. Before Sahana could move, Jimi took a wild swing at the hanging baseball.

Sahana's puzzlement turned immediately to anger. "Divyesh!" she screamed, leaping towards the glass door. Didn't the idiot woman know that it was delicate, made of paper? But this was a person who would leave underwear in a man's mailbox!

Jimi turned blindly, swinging the bat over his head, the kids backing away, the baseball spinning out wildly from a glancing blow. "Divyesh!" Sahana screamed again. She grabbed the handle of the sliding door and plunged out into the yard. The kids and parents turned towards her scream, their faces lit with surprise, and Jimi blindly swung again, the bat barely missing the one boy's head before making solid contact with the baseball, which let out an oomph of released air. It swung wide on its string, arcing out under the tree, and from the gaping hole in its side, a river of color showered over the lawn, drops of green and red and orange and blue, discs of butterscotch and peppermint patties, and the kids turned away from Sahana and screamed and lunged, diving at the ground, scrambling for the candy raining out in swoops of color as the baseball continued to swing.

Sahana watched in astonishment as Jimi tore the scarf from his eyes and plunged into the heap of children piled up and scrabbling at the ground beneath the tree. She could see Charlie looking her way and whispering to one of the other women. She was starting to see how this life would be: no canyon, but a bombardment of women who gave underwear, parrots where none should be, boys peeing from rooftops, candy inside baseballs, icebergs of bland beef and sparks of lime pickle, all of it reeling out around her. She turned to the house to look for Divyesh, to ask him to explain, and found him standing in the door, his eyes lapsing from fear into amusement as he took in the scene. She did not care when he started laughing; she cared only to see that he'd been close enough, after all, to hear her calling.

Claire Bateman

The Shadow Quilt

Far larger than the world,
it weighs precisely nothing,

which is why we find it impossible to lift.

Its seams are either transparent
or microscopic,

and the places where it's chosen
to separate from itself—

some of them quite vast—

are neither holes nor ruptures,
but something not unlike
musical interludes,

though the fabric exhales
only silence.

Never in its life
has the shadow quilt been folded,
nor does it fray or get bunched up,

though we've discovered
to our delight

whole regions of it layered
fathomless nothings deep.

Charlie Bondhus

Putting a Body into a Bag

Nobody I know.
I’m supposed to be grateful.
But all I think about is the mess
and why did the bullet have to pierce an artery?

I wonder how much blood the human body contains,
something I learned in science class
and have since forgotten. I Google it
but the cell’s signal is too weak.

No wind today
and the sun hangs
heavy as an unanswered question
or meat on a hook.

I light a cigarette,
which doesn’t make much sense;
we need to move
the body

into the bag, and I need
both hands.
O’Reilly isn’t in a hurry
though; he just stands there and looks,

eyes moving from the body
to me smoking to
the body to
me smoking.

He finally shakes his head
and mutters “Shit,”
like the situation
can be summed up in one word
and I’m about to agree
until I realize he doesn’t mean it that way,
he means it literally. We both smell it,
the stench

breaking through like an explosion.
It’s in our ears,
this desperate stink,
this unavailing assertion of life,

the body, furious
at its destruction, finding
one final way
to express itself.

No point in waiting.

I stub out my cigarette, grasp his ankles.
O’Reilly grabs the shoulders.
We hoist him, blood, shit,
all into the nylon bag.

Noel Conneely

Going For the Prize

The sack of lust I sew with gut;
It leaks into my resolve.
Too long on the pin point of love,
the bubble bursts.

I see rain on the sky’s face,
fire in a fallen tree.
At every fence I fail
to jump the mystery.

The first girl I meet
will probably do;
if she can get her foot
into the shoe.

My old man sees petals wilt
in the soft primrose of her eye.
My boy reads the road to heaven
in the sweet gospel of her thigh.

Maryann Corbett

A Volume of Cases

The stiff-sewn quires. The buckram cover.
The meth abuse. The absent mother.
The prepaid phones that called each other.

The home foreclosed. The groaning debt.
The liabilities offset.
The punch thrown in the bar. The threat.

The dry recitals, where and when.
The last appeals of dying men.
The sentence to be parsed again.

The deference. The court's respect.
The reasoning it must reject.
The lives behind the pages, wrecked.

The pieces that will not align.
The silent matters they decline.
The gold impressed into the spine.

Jeffery Donaldson

An Honest Man

This nostalgia for the origin of experience,
it wears us down but keeps sending us out
once more to get the knack of the evening

in the narrow streets before the evening passes.
And the evening passes and you come back
to where you started, not in time, for it is

later now, but to the place, to the doorway
you parted from, its barn wood still faded blue
the way you had left it. Another let down.

You keep feeling, in spite of yourself, that there is
an openness about the windows that you can
see through, and a scent under the clotheslines

not made from other scents. And yet how far
these mayhaps must be from their earliest
forms and templates, the evening's archetypal jig.

There is the story of the man who went out
one evening to find it, the primordial pattern,
the evening that had been used since the beginning

to make other evenings, and he carried a lighted
lantern as Diogenes had done once, when
the sun was still shining. He held it out in front.

And people thought it was odd the way he looked,
as he walked out beyond the end of the village
where the road turned and the streetlights fell away.

And the story has it that he failed like the others,
that once the sun had gone out on the horizon
he came back through the village streets in the dark

with nothing to show for his long excursion,
no branch or stone, no souvenir, nor any news
of the clouds and where they had come from.

Except that the lamp was gone, left somewhere
in the fields, you imagined, pointless there,
but easy enough to find before day break.

Anna Evans

The Memory Thief

The memory thief began with pocket change
you hardly missed. You tried to rearrange
your words like dimes, make phrases for a quarter.
But soon found you were twenty dollars shorter—
a minor loss, and yet entirely strange.

You gave away more ground in each exchange.
As yesterdays ran through your hands like water
the memory thief

stole names and dates, made faces interchange.
Your public failures mounted to estrange
all of your friends. At last he stole your daughter
or did she run away with that marauder,
the memory thief?

Courtney Flerlage

Exodus

Tonight the neighbors release sky lanterns over the ocean.
Pulsing through red tethlon, the lights billow up & out
as children dodge the flames to hoist the lights into the land
breeze,
all reckless steps & kicked-up sand. It's easy to imagine the
catastrophe:

wind catches lantern and pulls from over dune
to stilted houses and dry, salty decks.
But the land breeze, air of the sea sun-warmed to shore,
cools & sinks, & we can depend on the emptiness over the ocean
to pull back its dead breeze. This is how space can trick you,
imitate a living thing,

as when, three years before, I watched an astronomer inflate a
red balloon
in a vacuum. *What's filling it?* I asked.
Nothing. It's expanding to fill the space.

(The couple on the deck next door tip their chairs back & sip
umbrella drinks
that tinkle every time they tip too far. I saw a star die once, the
woman says.
It just snuffed out, like a dead firefly. Tink. *Coulda' just been
dust,* says the man.
They're so far away that space dust blocks them out.)

Over the ocean, the red lights are shuddering spots in the dark,
& tomorrow morning we'll find the casings washed ashore,
mangled & sun-crisped like dried medusae.

I remember you used to name the stars to me
when it was quiet & we were alone, sitting under all that old
light—
there's Sirius, Polaris, the Pleiades. How knowledge & names
cannot be unlearned—when pushed away, they only die
& then return. If it is as Lucretius says—
we must confess there is a void in things
that, when created, will eventually fill with air—

then the universe is too efficient,
& I'm not sure there are enough people on this Earth.
Your recycled parts turn up everywhere—I've heard strangers
laugh-choke the way you did; there's a baker in D.C. somewhere
whose wrists have stolen your piano hands.

I've often dreamed myself into the tide of Moses—
Red Sea rolling apart a path for my feet, crashing
behind as I trek the sandy bottom.
Unlike the crush of wave to shore, this cycle was never repeated,
& so I'm convinced you can still see his footprints,
as untouched as the pocked surface of the moon.

Alice Friman

Sweet Hell: A Conversation with Alice Friman

During a recent visit to Troy University, Ms. Friman addressed a creative writing class and afterward answered questions from students Nathalie Boyd, Caleb Humphreys, Samantha Loff, and Claire Mathis.

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How did you get started?

When I was in college at sixteen, I would write terrible poems about being in love with the wrong person – nothing's changed has it? When I was in my thirties I would get the urge to write a poem, and I would write it and hide it in a drawer. And that went on for fourteen years. The person in you who writes is the deepest part of you there is. So what was going on really? I was hiding myself in the drawer. But who knew that? I had three kids. I had a lot of floors to scrub. Anyway, that's what it was. Maybe at the end of twelve, thirteen years I had fifteen poems hidden in the drawer. And what happened was I had a student named Randy, who was eighteen years old. I was forty-four. He said to me, 'You write poetry don't you? There's a poetry reading downtown. Why don't you go?' And I, who wanted to travel the world, and later did by myself, said 'No, I can't do that. You take me.' Eighteen years old, and he took me. So we go to this place. It was a bar, and there were eight people there. Four of them were dead drunk, blotto, out. And they got up and they read poetry, and I said, Well, it's not so bad. So I took them out of my purse and got up on stage. And I am pretty good in front of an audience, I enjoy it. But my hands were shaking. And when I came down, they said to

me, You know, you're pretty good. You should come back. And that was the beginning of my second life. I would go there every Tuesday night. And I took the poems out of the drawer – in other words, I took myself out of the drawer. It just happened.

Do you have any poems that were inspired by your childhood?

Is that a joke? I would say at least half of them were. Or at least inspired by one's parents or one's family. When you're a child your parents are great people. Great, big, powerful people. To see them shrink and to see them die in your hands, and I mean actually in my hands, is very difficult. One of my books is called The Book of the Rotten Daughter, I'll show it to you. The working title was Death, Death, and Some More of It. My father called me "Rotten Daughter." And it wasn't a pet name. And I am not a rotten daughter. He was just a little wacky. And very harmful. Which is what makes a poet good. So, you can't get away form it. Even if you think you can, you can't. It's who you are.

In your poem "At the Holocaust Museum," there seems to be a correlation between the need for visual understanding, and a desire to re-connect with other people, between your group's compulsion to witness and their mutual politeness while huddled together.

I can see that you understood the poem perfectly. I wrote what I saw happening: in the face of such unbelievable horror, I was struck by how people who didn't know each other at all (there was no "group"), seemed to want to press together, and in so doing, be kind. It was as if we were all reduced to children again and needed the comfort.

Do you have a favorite image that tends to recur?

Yes, and I think that probably everyone does. I think they come from one's childhood. The image that recurs quite a bit often is the ocean. I spent my summers, from the time I was seven to twelve, on Long Beach. In those days, Long Beach was completely empty. It was a child's paradise, which meant they left you alone with great big empty fields and beaches. And the ocean itself, to a seven year old, is very large. I find images of the ocean coming back and coming back.

Was it Yeats who said that everyone is naturally drawn to the ocean?

I don't know if it was Yeats who said it, but it's true. Especially for women. You'll find women sitting on the beach alone, or with someone else, just sitting and staring at the ocean. And it's very comforting, you know, because those are the things that are going to be there after you're gone. Other things I write about a lot are trees. I won a fellowship at Bernheim Forest in Kentucky. You come for a month, and they give you a place to stay and write about trees. After I did that, I kept going back all the time. So I've got all these poems about trees. In the latest book, Vinculum, every section begins with a poem from Berheim Forest. It's a forest and arboretum. It's just wonderful to walk around and see.

You said that half of your poems are inspired by your childhood. What about the other half?

I go out and take what I call "image walks," a lot, a lot. And I see something, and I scribble it down. I see something else, and I scribble it down. What you're really doing is gathering material that will, in turn, reflect how you feel in

the moment. Not how you think you feel, but how you really feel. I also very much am interested in love. I'm an old romantic. And you know, Tennyson said, The low sun makes the color. And I have been falling in love all my life. And usually with the wrong person. So I'm into misery a lot.

Are you grateful in any way for such experiences?

Oh, no. That's a great big question, because you're asking three questions at once. Yeah. I tell my students when they come to me and they say, Oh, I can't write because I just broke up with my boyfriend. I'm miserable. I say, Good. I've got a very dark view of the world. I mean, I'm funny, but I have a dark, dark view. I think life is a tragedy. Ask the question again. Am I grateful for my misery? I'm grateful I can do something with it. And I think because of that, poetry has kept me sane, really.

In "Diapers for my Father," It's fantastic how Ophelia and the narrator, presumably you, relate to one another. How did you come about connecting such a personal moment to Shakespeare's play?

I had just come back from the store after purchasing the diapers. Why the words "To be or not to be" popped into my head I don't know, but they did. And then I remember I laughed. Such a big question: to be or not to be when what I had just faced was so mundane: pads or pull-ons. So here then was the true face of death—the reality of dying—not as a grand soliloquy but in the rather comic and tragic purchasing of diapers. And then, the poem took over. That is, once I engaged Hamlet, I just pushed the inherent comparisons.

Can you describe your writing process? Do you maintain a daily writing schedule? How long does it take you to complete a poem?

I write every day. That is, I spend time every day working like a wasp over her cells. Rewriting, rewriting. Tinkering, tinkering. It takes me at least a month to complete a piece, or to come to the conclusion that it's done. I work on one thing at a time. Not that I recommend working that way to other people. It's just the way I do it.

How do you make time to write?

That's the wrong question. The question should be: how do you make time for everything else? Sorry, I'm being funny. Well, we don't have television. I don't belong to Facebook or any other social media. I live a very quiet life. Look, the truth is, that people do what they want to do. If you want to write stongly enough, you will.

Do you always believe in your work, even in its infancy?

I believe in nothing. Least of all my work. I write from the inside out (the inside of an image or thought or feeling) and try hard not to look at the particular piece I'm working on objectively, that is, as a judge. That's not my job. My job is to SEE the world and write what I see. If what you mean by belief is, do I have faith in my work—that is, do I think it's good—then the answer is no. Do I think if I work hard enough focusing and refocusing I can make it better, then the answer is yes.

How do you decide what meter your poem deserves?

I am reminded of what Derek Walcott said about rhythm. He said that when first beginning a piece what you have to do is discern the rhythm. Yes, before you even know what you are talking about, or where you're going as to language or even sense. It's the inherent rhythm of those first lines that will carry you, and not what you're saying. And I've found that to

be true in my own work. You will rewrite and rewrite to clarify and better focus the sense of what you're saying, but underneath it all is that music that is inherent in the opening lines. And that rhythm is nothing that you "decide." It's what's there already. I am, of course, speaking of free verse. But even so, it's the poem that "decides" what meter it wants to be in, not you.

What would your advice be to a person just beginning the poetry-writing process?

Read a lot of the poetry that you love, slowly and out loud, so that you get a feel for the deliciousness of the language. After all, you are entering a love affair that promises to last your whole life, and hopefully a long life if possible, so take your vitamins. Read, read, read, and go to as many poetry readings as you can. And whatever happens in your life, take it. That is to say, live it and feel it. Be brave. Suck the juice out of every experience you have. Even the bad ones.

What do you think of the current MFA programs? Is an MFA necessary to succeed in today's market? Can an MFA really make somebody a better writer?

I have very mixed feelings about this one. When I started writing seriously in my mid-forties, I had three kids and a kitchen floor to scrub. If there were MFA programs around, except for Iowa, I didn't know about them. I started to write because I needed to put into language what I was feeling. And the more one writes, the more one has to write. One learns how to write by writing. There's no magic bullet. The writing scene today seems to me to be get-a-job oriented, and of course the MFA system feeds into that. Will getting an MFA make you a better writer? Well, perhaps a more disciplined one, and perhaps it can develop one's natural penchant for stringing words together. But it can't create talent or

teach someone how to see, and an artist—any kind of artist—is someone who knows how to see.

What poets had a strong influence on you?

I hope you mean have, for one doesn't stop reading and developing. But if you mean had, then all those wonderful women who split the poetry world apart a few decades ago: Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, etc. But if you mean have a strong influence on me and continue to do so, then Keats, Yeats, Rilke, Hopkins, Albert Goldbarth, Louise Glück, Neruda, Carol Frost, E. A. Robinson, David Huddle, etc.

Glück's the best thing writing, I'm telling you. Read a book called the *Wild Iris*. Goldbarth's a rascal. His poetry is so different from Glück's. I don't know if influence is the word. There are poets I love, and poets that I read and say, Look at that! You can do that? You can read Louise Glück, and it's clear as crystal. She doesn't use any tricks, and yet, how does she get from here to there? So I don't know if that's an influence. When I first started reading Goldbarth, I thought, Oh my goodness, you can just stick anything in a poem! Anything! Pizza! He's got a book called *The Kitchen Sink*. And he knows everything. So that was sort of freeing. To know, well, I can just stick it in.

My favorite poet of all time is Gerard Manley Hopkins. He never fails to thrill me. And I'm not religious at all, so it's not that. It's the language, the idea of rapture, that kind of business. To be able to get that down on paper. I mean, I've done it, but it's so hard. O thou lord of life, send my roots rain. If only I had written that one!

Would you describe your writing process?

I have in my house, unless I go away to write, which I do sometimes, an area surrounded by glass. It looks out over the top of a forest. It's gorgeous. You can watch the hawks circling. I've got nothing in my head. If I'm lucky, I have an idea, but that's unusual. It's funny to watch yourself do what you do. I go to another room in the house, not on purpose, I just do. I'll play with a pen and paper, and it has to be a black pen, and it has to be a piece of paper, folded in half. Once I get the first lines, which might not end up being the first lines, and I get the rhythm, then I go upstairs and put it on the computer. I used to swear I would never, never write on the computer, but I do. I used to write on the typewriter with one finger. So I put it up there on the computer and say, What have we got here? It's pretty lousy. And then I tell myself, It doesn't make any difference. I'm just playing. (I lie. It's called creative lying.) And every day, I spend time with it. I see where I can go, what is there. And so it takes me sometimes a month, two, three, to write one poem. Each poem has a number and a date it was finished and a 3x5 card. So this way I can keep track of where it is, if I'm sending it out, the dates it goes out and comes back, where it goes next. I'm very organized.

Do you write more than one poem at a time?

No, but there's not a right way to do it. It's just how I do it. You know the poet Rita Dove? She once told me that she's got these envelopes, and they're arranged by color. And in each envelope, she's got these little snippets. So, when she sits down to write, she says, What envelope do we write in today? So I tried that. It was a disaster. You have to find your own way without looking for it. It will find you. So I usually only work on one. And I'm obsessive. When I'm really getting to the part I like, which is tweaking it at the end, when I sort of know where it's going, and it's not quite there, sometimes I'll stay up half the night, just tweaking.

Then you've got to begin again, which is terrible.

Is that why you describe poetry as your "sweet hell"?

Well isn't it? So engaging, so demanding, so frustrating, so delicious—the words, the wonderful words just slipping around all over the place. Sounds like sweet hell to me.

Diapers for My Father

Pads or pull-ons—that
is the question. Whether to buy
pads dangled from straps
fastened with buttons or Velcro—
pads rising like a bully's cup
stiff as pommel with stickum backs
to stick in briefs. Or, dear God,
the whole thing rubberized,
size 38 in apple green, with
or without elastic leg. Or the kind,
I swear, with an inside pocket
to tuck a penis in—little resume
in a folder. Old mole, weeping
his one eye out at the tunnel's end.

The clerk is nothing but patience
practiced with sympathy.
Her eyes soak up everything.
In ten minutes she's my cotton batting,
my triple panel, triple shield—my Depends
against the hour of the mop: skeleton
with a sponge mouth dry as a grinning brick
waiting in the closet.

She carries my choices to the register,
sighing the floor with each step.
I follow, absorbed away to nothing.

How could Hamlet know what flesh is heir to?
Ask Claudius, panicky in his theft,
hiding in the garden where it all began
or behind the arras, stuffing furbelows
from Gertrude's old court dress into his codpiece.
Or better, ask Ophelia, daughter too
of a foolish, mean-mouthed father,
who launched herself like a boat of blotters
only to be pulled babbling under the runaway stream.

(first published in The Ohio Review)

At the Holocaust Museum

Like Dante, we too are led
down. The elevator that swooped us up
and spewed us out, leaves us—
clusters of strangers—to the inexorable power
of no way to go but with each other
and the relentless spiral of design.

We shuffle, slow as sludge
in a drain, winding to the bottom.
We gawk, not in disbelief but believing
this has little to do with us—our comfort
in the face of explanations that explain
nothing, the old jackboot footage
of rantings, book burnings, and the car
that waits for us, rattling with ghosts
on its siding, and the glass case
big as Germany, knee-deep in human hair.

We grow quiet. We have crawled
into our eyes. There is nothing
but what we see. And at base bottom,
what's to see but the dredged-up bottom
of ourselves that belongs only to ourselves
and the moving tide of each other.
We crowd in to look. The eye is hungry—
a dog dragging its belly through streets,
sniffing out its own vomit, not getting enough:
the experiments, the ovens, and all their

tattooed histories fidgeting in smoke
that rose like bubbles in a fish tank
to dissipate in air. Fingers pluck
at our sleeves. Gold teeth hiss
in their case. What do they want of us,
we who can give nothing, reduced to nothing
but dumb pupils staring at evidence—
the starved and naked dead, the bulldozers,
the British soldier throwing up in his hand?
We press to the TV monitors, mob in,

fit our bodies together like multiple births
in the womb, wanting the heat of each other,
the terrible softness beneath clothes.
Excuse me, Pardon, and the knot of us
slips a little, loosens to make room.
In the smallest of voices, Sorry we say
as if, battered back to three again,
all we have is what Mother said was good.
Pinkie in a dike. Bandaid on a gusher.
But what else do we know to do

at the end of another century that retrospect
will narrow to a slit, if this Holocaust—
this boulder big as Everest—isn't big enough
to change the tide that ran through it?

(first published in The North American Review)

Primary Colors

Red is love,
rubies and valor. Venery

and the blast of trumpets. Mars
swirling in a dust of iron oxide—the last

victory-stained chariot rumbling the sky.
Red is ketchup. The mangled dead. Stop lights

and the heart's juice.

***

Blue is both heaven
and the naked abyss, the vein

under the tongue, Stilton cheese
and the hottest stars. Blue is turquoise

and trickery: the sky's bruised emptiness:
by night—black water, black hole.

Blue is saxophones. The Virgin's wrap.
Melancholy. Mondays. Picasso's period.

***

Yellow is radiance
not tainted by the smack of death. The sun's

democracy. New straw. Number 2 pencils.

Buddha's parasol. Yellow is gingko

in autumn. Vincent's draft horse of a color
to charm the gods. Wolves' eyes. Tigers

between their stripes. What remains
when you split green and leave the blues

behind. That July morning.
The dress I wore.

(first published in The Gettysburg Review)

Swedes

New Zealand, a rented car,
and me and my sweetie
white-knuckling the hairpin turns,
stopping at each overlook to stare
into the generosity of beauty
spilling out in the world,
when suddenly, a sign—
SWEDES FOR SALE.

Mile after lovely mile,
then another sign and soon
every fifty feet, homemade,
propped on posts or pinned
to burlap bags hanging from
mailboxes and fences, heavy
and lumpy with who knows what.

GET YOUR SWEDES NOW!

We look at each other.
Greta Garbo? ABBA?
King Gustav I who in 1523
freed Sweden from the Danes?

PUT MONEY IN SACK—25¢ A SWEDE

Could be something to eat—
potatoes or melons. If so, we
are tempted! Honor system or no,
a bargain's a bargain. Imagine,

two bits for an Ingmar Bergman
burger. A little ketchup, one bite
and a hairy spider crawls out,
and you're off searching for God
on a moth-eaten horse only
to realize your mother doesn't
love you and never did. And pssst…
there goes Sister in a white dress
giggling behind a bush, and life—
well, what does it mean anyway?

Then because my love is ever
the sensible one, he calls time out,
for we have been riding this joke
long enough, and see—there really is
a God—a picnic table not six feet
from the ocean for no one but us
and the wheeling black-backed
gulls shrieking in melodrama.

We take no pictures, so picture us
bundled up, huddled in the cold,
wielding our plastic silver—
peanut butter, the good bread,
our splurge of fine plum jelly
with brandy—while clouds
scud in, graying the skies, and me
reaching up to pull the hat down
tight over his ears—the hat that
plays havoc with his thinning hair.

Look, there we are under the one
shaft of sun left—still cracking jokes
and laughing over our Swedish mystery.
Eating lunch by a darkening sea.

(first published in The Southern Review)

At Okefenokee…
…/trembling earth/

Winter, and the alligator's heart
slows to a two-times-a-minute beat
while all reptilian seize and destroy—
the tank plates, the terrible teeth—
wallow in the sleep of black-stained water,
the dark looking glass of the swamp.

Imprisoned in the wrists, his pulse
paces in philosophic thought. Who dares
question what elegant adage or principle
quickens behind that perpetual grin?

Loops of Spanish moss canopy his head
and a fearsome quiet hushes the black-
satin water of his sheets. He concentrates
therefore he is—all seventy-eight
teeth and fifteen feet of him. I shiver
in my fleece. But the great mouth
is beyond hunger now, the catatonic
jaws, locked. It is the ides of January.
The Okefenoke trembles like a clogged sink
but will not go down. The fabulous lives:
the swamp's saviour: the stopper in the drain.

(first published in The Hamilton Stone Review)

Re-reading Emerson

Even when he was seventeen
he wrote in quotables,
the long looping sentences
arcing the cliff edge
of pages: the transcendent
pitch for a new America.

He was a train pulled by
its own light. Even when
writing of Goethe—
ahead in thought but each
thought running steel
horizontal to his own. Or
28 August 1833, Rydal Mt,
arguing Carlyle to Wordsworth—
the oak intact in the acorn.
The rose in the bud.

Truth is, from the first slap
to the final box, he flew
by the seat of his rhetoric:
a mantra of self-reliance
propped up by an over-arching
idea—electric and universal.
When we discern justice,
when we discern truth,
we do nothing of ourselves,
but allow a passage to its beams.

Truth was, he quickened each
of his days into history
suffering those beams. Derision,
disdain, a son's death, fire, and ever
his lost Ellen, her song coming
out of the darkness, deep-toned
and calling as from a dream.

It takes genius to live like that,
pulling a country behind you.

(first published in Ekphrasis)

Ken Haas

Atlantic City, 1959

Sunburn and salt water taffy,
butterscotch fudge sliced thin and often,
young bodies coddled in mounds of sand.

A mustachioed sailor in lastex skivvies
boxing a kangaroo, the new Miss Amercia
waving by in a top-down Eldorado
as a waitress dives headlong on horseback
toward a pool at the end of the pier.

At dusk the wives are off to the club
in summer dresses to hear Frank and Sammy,
husbands flipping the last of a Chesterfield
over the rail, or beading up in booths
on late calls to lovers in Brooklyn,
when here and there the lines go down,
their coins and many more that night
hung in the dead machines.

Under the boardwalk my immigrant dad
is unplugging the phones.
We will be back near dawn, father below,
re-connecting the wires of holiday
to the sockets of the workaday world,
son above, silver nickels and dimes
rushing his pockets like sea foam.

H.L. Hix

This If Not That

This place's parchedness does not prevent plasticity of
        palette.
True, no extravagant maples enable it
to rival your midwestern and New England splendors,
but just yesterday as its substitute my yard declared
a mushroom big as a catcher's mitt, heaped cap upon cap,
orange to rival any rust flared on any junked fender.
The leaves of the shrub shading it — a stunted tree, really —
fade, veins first, from alfalfa to buttermilk.
I've traded the tracing of tragic consequences for
a primary concern with precise color,

which seems more static only if one insists
that change occur quickly, that consequences follow
within one sitting and enforce a morality.
The cherry near my window evokes a childhood plum
bent permanently — grown — to the east for relief
from wind constant from the west. I trust few tenets,
but the ones I can't defy disfigure me
like that wind that tree. It is, I intuit, possible
to transcend our mundane perceptual limits
a few days at best, and often for only a few minutes

sprinkled across a lifetime. Which motivates
our trade in visual — or sonic, or haptic —
equivalents. Show me the tune of your world,
I'll sing you the feel of mine. My working-class wanderings
may never fetch me a glimpse of my old-money god.
God knows what she does in that mansion, what she meant
by these manicured lawns, whether she believes — I don't —
        in swans

and willows, grazing thoroughbreds glazed by morning mist.
I doubt it can make sense to give an argument
for disappearance shading into disembodiment,

but what is this if not that? For my skill-lessness
I compensate with method, here as elsewhere, now as
always:
method, my embrace of the givenness of Givenness.
Maybe your swing creaked on ropes from a beech branch,
but mine
grated on chains from a rusting frame braced above gravel.
I'm a blister on the knuckle of mortality.
My unhappy childhood mildews in the basement.
Perception brings past and future into the present.
Even in apparent barrenness, when I really see
I remember a small ornamental tree.

Jackleen Holton

No, I Never See Anything Bad

Except perhaps that one time
at the café when my friends,
newly married, opened

their palms to me, both life lines
bisected by matching arrows shot
from the Mount of Luna,

markings that might have once foretold
untimely death involving
a horse-drawn carriage. I caught

my breath and spoke instead of children,
predicting the three strawberry
faces I've since seen beaming

from Christmas card windows.
My friends have moved back east.
We've fallen out of touch.

It's important that you understand
the lines on the hand can change.
Yet, sometimes I wonder

if they're still headed
for that tragedy. Or were
those imprints merely proof

of a union that had to be written
in flesh? On my own hands,
I can't divine the nature

of my disasters. I’ve never seen
the skittish children playing
hide and seek. And I have yet

to find that twin palm
with its identical etchings, a mirror
in which I can foresee

a lake and a bridge, a night
with no moon, hands pressed
together, marked like lightning.

Frank Jamison

Watching The Perseids

It is the short end of August and already the days are
truncated,
winter's asterisms wait offstage in the tree branches.
Orion with his silent dog has his bow drawn. Castor and
Pollux
search for their golden fleece.

Meanwhile, those glib characters of summer follow the
ecliptic over
the escarpment to the West.
I love them with their cold light, their cold hearts and their
cold tales
of hot love and retribution.

They mix those two with ease, something I can't do,
bystander watching
bolides scud across the dark after midnight.
It looks like Perseus is flinging them at us, and perhaps we
deserve it,
the stoning I mean.

Brad Johnson

Allegory of the Cave

James hides the joint behind his back
as the cop approaches and asks
if he's really a cop or only dressed
as one for Halloween. Vonnegut wrote
Be careful what you pretend to be
because you are what you pretend
to be. I am Elvis, the fat one, the one
that got panties thrown in his face
due to what he once looked like. Back home,
my wife refuses to fake orgasm,
insisting honesty's essential
and a single act of fraud becomes
foundational so I'm disappointed
after being pleased rather than proud
about something I never knew I never did.
My daughter sleeps with her noise machine
playing recorded rain for hours until
the timer shuts off. My wife iPad shops
for non-stick pans while Kardashians carry
loaded bags along Lincoln Road
on the bedroom TV. I walk the dog
into the backyard night and he takes off
around the house where the porch lights
don't reach. The shadow on the roof sits
like a slug of black on black. Then
the Great Horned Owl bends its head, its ears
like diving boards drawn down. By the time
I race inside and drag my wife out,
it's gone. When she turns for explanation
I look to the dog for support. His tongue
is out which could be read as confirmation
or something else completely.

Avoiding Extras

Because of fog, the pitcher cannot read
the catcher's signs. Because of rain the rust
along the dugout walls begins to bleed.
Starting time was pushed back to the cusp
of midnight on the east coast. The bullpen's
overworked; call ups already sent back
down. Examining out-of-town box scores
the radio voice applies hit totals
to batting title races and wild card
standings. The scorekeeper quits counting
errors. Chatter from the first coach echoes
across the empty stadium bleachers.
The umpire confirmed Commissioner's
instructions before the game: there's no room
to schedule additional double headers.
A pennant is winnable for another
team in another city who needs the half
game counted. This game must be completed.
It matters more to fans in Kansas City,
northern Ohio, New York than to the crowd
huddling in concession lines, their kids fighting
with plastic straws, their gloves abandoned
on condiment counters and picnic benches.
Puddles push their tides across the warning
track towards the left fielder whose spikes stick
in sucking mud as rain drips off the batter's
helmet who creates a flood when he steps
outside the batter's box and turns his head
to adjust his gloves and study the shortstop
cheating in, the first and third basemen hugging
the line, the outfielders shifting left, the short

fence in right field appearing to lean
mercifully forward, bend down and offer
its neck to the executioner's swing.

Edward P. Kunzman

Donatello Juan

Father Hubay's younger assistant, Father Chester, was not-so-secretly admired by every girl in the eighth grade. Every time he passed by them on the sidewalk or in the hall, Mary Beth would fan her face with her hand, Sheila Markovich would coo, and my cousin Peggy would fling her long hair behind her shoulder flirtatiously. Even the most reserved ones, Tina Cubierta and Willa Wysocki, would blush from ear to ear. Before his once-a-week visits to our classroom, Sister Alicia would remind the excited bevy of teenage hopefuls that it was a sin to "make eyes" at a celibate priest. "If you paid half as much attention to your studies, girls, you'd all be Rhodes scholars—and you could save your mindless panting for phys. ed."

On Veterans Day, Father Chester arrived ten minutes late. Sheila applauded when he finally stepped through the door, and two or three other girls joined her. Sister Alicia, who had been drilling us on spelling during the seemingly endless wait, jumped to her feet. "Ladies, this isn't The Ed Sullivan Show and Father Chester isn't toting an electric guitar!" she barked. "If you can't control your hormones, I will help you. Up, up, up! Come with me to the chapel where we will pray a rosary on our knees for chastity and temperance." The moaning rose to a fever pitch before the teacher picked up her pointer and smacked the side of her desk. Tina leapt a foot off the ground and Willa shrieked.

"Girls, we shall proceed in silence or we shall skip phys. ed. this afternoon and return to the chapel for further reflection. If the price of chastity is bruised knees, far be it from me to spare you the pain!" The short, but intimidating, drill sergeant studied her disgruntled troops from atop the

wooden platform. "And don't you boys look so smug. We might all spend the last hour of this school day—and every remaining school day of 1969—on our knees, pleading for the gift of self-control."

Suddenly you could hear the ticking of the big clock over the chalkboard. No one dared smile, not even Father Chester, whose long fingers covered his mouth—although there was no masking the laughter in his eyes. "I believe they've chosen phys. ed., Sister Alicia," he said very quietly. "Girls and boys alike."

"The day's still young, very young," she returned with a mighty frown before motioning the girls to precede her out of the room. "Use the time wisely, Father. These smug males are no more innocent in their hearts than the panting females. Quieter, perhaps, but their eyes are always roving like King David's." Before closing the door behind her, she added, "I swear, Father, they watch too much television."

"Undoubtedly," he concurred with a deferential nod, then tossed his overcoat over a vacated desk by the door and rubbed his hands together. "Well, gentlemen, in honor of Veterans Day, I was hoping to chat with you about one of the church's veterans, St. Martin of Tours, whose feast we celebrate today. However, I believe your esteemed leader wishes me to give you a lecture on sex." His ruddy face scanned the half-empty room. "Where shall we begin?"

"Who's King David?" Don Niccolo blurted out. "What TV show's he on?"

As the place went up for grabs, Mike Kulicky turned to confront his inquisitive classmate. "Donatello!" he exclaimed, the only one besides Sister Alicia with the nerve to call the pest by his baptismal name. "You've never heard of 'The Son of Jesse'?"

Niccolo shook his head. "What channel's it on?" he said before realizing he'd fallen into another of Kulicky's snares. His nostrils flared when hoots broke out on all sides.

The young priest whistled and held up his hands like a traffic cop. "Isn't it the custom in this room to raise your hand, wait to be acknowledged, and then stand before you speak?" he challenged us. "I don't mind a little less formality, but I won't put up with pandemonium. Can you act like adults if you're treated like adults?" He searched our eyes for agreement and then nodded. "Okay. Now, let's return to Don's question: Who's King David? And I'll throw in a bonus question: What does he have to do with sex?"

When no one raised his hand, Father Chester approached Mike's desk. "You're always quick with your gibes, Mike. How quick are you when it comes to knowledge of the Bible?"

Rising, Mike stood as straight as a new recruit in the army. "Very quick, Father. My mom was raised a Lutheran, not a Catholic."

"Oh, I see." The assistant pastor chuckled, crossing his arms across his chest. "Who was King David then?"

"The second king of Israel, Father, the son of Jesse and the father of Solomon." Mike peered over at King David's son's namesake. "Not Solly Davenport, of course, but the Solly who built the Temple."

"Impressive, Michael. You may be seated." Our weekly visitor walked to the other side of the room. "Now who can tell me why Sister Alicia mentioned King David's roving eyes? Don't any of you Catholic boys read the Good Book?"

I dropped my face to hide my embarrassment. Aunt Agatha had told me the story of King David shortly after Dad's lecture on the birds and the bees, undoubtedly fearing that the shocking information might have excited some uncontrollable longing in me. "Even holy men can stray when it comes to…sex," she had whispered. "It's a sad, sad fact, Nephew, a sad, sad fact." Her warning must have been effective, for the thought of a naked Bathsheba still unsettled me. Once I had even had a nightmare about having to scrub her pink back.

"Dresser and Kulicky are friends," Smartly burst into my meditation with an audible smirk. "Maybe they read the Good Book together, Father, when the rest of us are doing homework."

A succession of snickers followed this intrusion, but Father Chester seemed to miss its mean spirit. "Christian, do you know about Kind David's roving eyes?" he queried me. "Is that why you're blushing?"

Looking up at Mike and rolling my eyes, I stood up. "One day King David was walking around on the rooftop and saw a beautiful woman named Bathsheba in her bathtub. He ordered his servants to bring her to his bedroom, and he…he took advantage of her, even though she was married to someone else. Then he had her husband killed so he could have her as his own."

"Is that right?" Randy Bonduran asked, staring at me, his mouth and eyelids wide open, his big body limp with disbelief.

"That's the Reader's Digest version," the priest affirmed. "Thank you, Christian. Maybe you and Mike should invite these pagans to join your book club. I think Randy's very eager to sign up."

"That's because that's as close as he'll ever get to a naked girl," Smartly quipped with a snort of self-satisfaction. This time the cruelty didn't escape Father Chester's notice. "So, Brad, tell us: How many naked girls have you been with? Perhaps you and I should spend some time in the confessional after class?"

Smartly squirmed in his seat for nearly a minute. "None, Father," he admitted at last, looking at the floor. "Except in your dreams, right?" the priest returned.

My humbled classmate threw his head back in surprise. "What! Is that a sin too?"

Father Chester laughed and ran his hand through his moderately long brown hair. "Now we come to the crux of the matter: sex and sin. We Catholics have a bad habit of

thinking that all things sexual are sinful. What King David did was obviously sinful: adultery and murder. What Mr. Smartly didn't deny—a sexual dream now and then—is not. There's a big difference between a sexual being, which we all are by God's design, and a sexual predator or a sexual pervert, which, pray God, none of us will ever become."

"I don't think Sister Alicia even wants us to be sexual beings," Solomon observed. "She gets riled up if we spend too much time with 'someone of the opposite sex.'"

Leaning against the wall, the youthful priest joined his hands and crossed one ankle over the other. He grinned. "Sister Alicia's no fool," he said, "but young men who have recently gone through puberty often are. Sex is a drive, like hunger for food, and until we get used to its power, we're likely to do many foolish things." He lifted his eyebrows several times, as if daring us to challenge him.

"Like wanting to kiss a girl?" Lee Bentley asked rather timidly.

"What rock did you crawl out from under, Bentley?" Don cried. "I want to do more than kiss a girl!"

I couldn't believe my ears. I looked first at Mike, who sat uncharacteristically speechless, and then at Solomon, whose dark eyes stared in astonishment at the loudmouth in the next row. Clearly, I hadn't misunderstood. After such a brazen remark, Sister Alicia would have either fainted and fallen off her platform or grabbed her pointer and threatened Niccolo within an inch of his life. Father Chester, however, seemed untroubled. His calm, confident presence soothed my nervous stomach.

"The sin is not in the wanting, boys," he clarified, walking to the head of Niccolo's row and leaning over the empty desk in the front row. His handsome face gleamed under the fluorescent lights. "The sin is in the doing before we're ready, before we've made a commitment." He held up his large, strong hands, as if in prayer at the altar. "Even I want to do more than kiss a pretty woman sometimes, but I

make another choice. Otherwise, I'd be as guilty of sin as King David."

Randy Bonduran was shaking his head. "But you're a priest, Father?"

"I'm a sexual being first, Randy, like you, like all of your classmates." Once again, he scanned the whole room with his penetrating blue-green eyes. When they met mine, I nearly cooed like Sheila Markovich. "Who of us can honestly say that he's never had a desire, dream, or fantasy about"—his warm smile made my heart thump a little faster—"a pretty female?"

Pow! The question seemed like a punishing jab from God, a thunderbolt from heaven aimed directly at my racing heart: What are you doing making eyes at the assistant pastor? Oh my God! I was as bad as the girls who "couldn't control their hormones"—worse, for I was a boy whose eyes should be fastened on Bathsheba and not on King David. I clamped my teeth to dam up my confusion and keep the scary truth from leaking out.

"Christian, you'd never make a good liar, would you?" Father Chester was laughing at me. "Your face is a wide-open window."

"What!" I yelled, nearly vomiting in fear. "What…what do you mean?"

"I mean you'd rather talk about anything but sex, wouldn't you?"

"Uh…yes, Father, I would."

"Don't worry, kid. Pretty girls make us all dizzy, sometimes even sick to our stomachs. Just be patient with yourself, okay?"

I bit my tongue and prayed for deliverance. "Okay, Father."

From behind me, Brad Smartly snorted. "Don Juan, we call him. No woman can resist his dark sin and black eyes."

"That's Donatello Juan to you, Bradford," Mike

jumped in, just as someone rapped loudly on the door and pulled it open. There, directly under the lintel, Sister Alicia stood with her arms akimbo, ready to reclaim her turf.
"Our session's over, boys," Father Chester announced the obvious. He picked up his overcoat and gave us a military salute. "We'll see you next week, boys, you and the girls. Sweet dreams."

As the females were herded back into the classroom like sheep, I laid my head on the desk and thanked God for the return of the drill sergeant. Spelling, grammar, history, civics, geography—or even the Beethoven sonata that I was learning. Anything but sex! My nights were confusing enough: I needed clarity during the daylight.

[Sheila]

Dear Christian,

Peggy told Mary Beth, and Mary Beth told Cynthia, and Cynthia told Becky, and Becky told me—and apparently everyone else—that Father Chester thinks the reason you've been acting funny lately is YOU'RE IN LOVE! All of us girls were SURPRISED! We talked about you and your SECRET LOVE AFFAIR all during PE—when Miss Hully wasn't listening, of course. No one's sure who your PRETTY SENORITA is, but we're betting she's ONE OF US. You didn't fall for someone in HIGH SCHOOL, did you? Or worse still, someone at the PUBLIC SCHOOL? GOD FORBID! Anyway, I volunteered to solve the BIG MYSTERY—like Nancy Drew with her spyglass and notebook.

As I see it, Peggy is out of the running because SHE'S YOUR COUSIN (so to speak), Mary Beth is out because SHE'S TOO PLAIN, Cynthia is out because SHE LIKES BOOKS BETTER THAN BOYS, Tina is out because SHE'S A SCAREDY-CAT, Willa is out because SHE DOESN'T HAVE A PERSONALITY, Becky is out because SHE'S GOT A BIG MOUTH, Vera is out because HER HAIR LOOKS LIKE WET SPAGHETTI, Michele is out because

HER TWIN BROTHER LOOKS LIKE A CHIMPANZEE and you might end up having UGLY CHILDREN with her (ugliness might be one of those recessive genes, you know). I don't need to go on, do I? There's ONLY ONE who is QUALIFIED to be your SECRET LOVE, and she's:

Stunning
Honest
Excellent
Intelligent
Lovely
Anxious to hear from you!

Tell me I'm wrong and I'll hand over my detective's badge (BUT ONLY TO YOU).

I'll hold my breath until I get your response. PLEASE DON'T KEEP ME IN SUSPENSE if you want to see me ALIVE again.

Forever yours,
Sheila Rose Markovich

PS: In case you didn't know:

1. *I like MUSICIANS AND ARTISTS. Any boy can shoot a basketball, right?*
2. *At Thanksgiving dinner, I always ask for DARK MEAT.*

Ann Lauinger

Spring Cold

March snow blooms the bare trees with white
theoretical blossoms
but fails to sugar-coat the human streets.

In my sickroom
I'm having it both ways: Kleenex clumps
of snow, Kleenex

cherry blossoms preposterously in flower.
This is the cusp
between inhale and exhale, bouncing

molecules caged
for a split second of poise, brief recess
from the school

of hard knocks. It's equinoctial March,
when eggs
stand on end in perfect balance,

porcelained suns
at ease with the ghosts of chicken past
and chicken future.

This is the imagination's soft spill
into the slick
trafficked streets, smooth circuit fused,

self-sustaining,
unscrambled. The hot pulse slows,
sweatered,

muffling the racket of the blind
        ferryman's logjams
and collisions, suspending for the moment,

        all along the river-
banks, the sighing and settling
        of riparian rot.

Shoshana Levenberg

A Life

The thought roused her, lapping persistently at her consciousness: was her mother braver than she? This woman, her mother, timid and lackluster in the raucous brilliance of their family, bought a rope (none to be found in a scholar's home), learned how to tie a knot (no sailors here), slipped one end through the chandelier that never got dusted, tied it securely to the doorknob, stood on a chair, slipped the noose around her neck and kicked over the back of the chair. Did she panic when the noose tightened and she knew for certain there was no going back? Or was she unflinching as she outstared death? An uncharacteristic empathy and generosity washed over Naomi as the tide of pills pulled her out to the vastness; yes, in this, their deaths, her mother was the braver one.

* * *

I didn't find Naomi until the next day. We were supposed to meet for breakfast, but she didn't show up or answer my increasingly frantic calls to her cell and home numbers. My cousin was pathologically punctual and never flakey. So I went over to her tiny apartment on a quiet, tree-lined street in New York's West Village. No one answered when I banged on the door, but I could feel her in there. I'm not sure what I thought, the dread filling my airways like a noxious gas, making it hard to breathe. I used my key and opened the door slowly, calling her name, "Naomi, Naomi, are you here?" I didn't really expect an answer, and there was none.

She lay on top of her bed, lightly covered by the beautiful, intricately crocheted brown and orange afghan she bought in Italy, the empty pill bottles neatly arranged on the table next to her. She didn't in the slightest look like she was

asleep; her thick lips, always in motion, seemed carved in wax; large expressive eyes, her best feature our aunts used to say, staring inertly.

"Oh, Naomi," the words whooshed from my lungs as I sank down on the side of the bed. I sat there, pity suspending all action and thought. My poor small, dark Naomi, unloved as a child, unlovable as an adult. An overwhelming fatigue crept up my body as my head sank into the pillow and I stretched out next to her.

* * *

We were twelve the autumn her father sent her to stay with my mom and dad and me in a small town in Pennsylvania. She found her mother's body, lifelessly held by a noose in the bedroom of their Brooklyn brownstone. It sounds tragic and horrific to say it baldly like that, but at the time it was just part of my life. I thought it was kinda fun to have a ready-made sister to alleviate the loneliness of my only-child state. My mom instructed me to "Be nice to your cousin because she's very sad," but I scarcely heard the words, filtered as they were through my pre-pubescent daydreams of confidences and adventures.

I was on the cusp between the delicious freedom of a childhood crammed with baseball and bicycles, where I could travel seamlessly from the men's world of scholarship and ideas, to the women's domain of family and home in the orthodox Jewish world I inhabited, and the restrictive role of an observant Jewish young woman. I'd fought fiercely to broaden my horizons, insisting, to my family's horror, on transferring to a public school from the intellectually challenging but socially constraining yeshiva, a private religious school. Now, even the secular world was betraying me, insisting on my "young lady-hood." I was not going gracefully.

My erudite, handsome uncle, Eli, drove the three hours from New York in a borrowed car to deliver Naomi on an early Sunday afternoon. My mom, kind-hearted, bustled about,

trying to make Naomi feel at home, food being the surest way to love and comfort. She turned to Eli, smiling broadly, and said, “Of course you’ll stay for dinner,” trying for a declarative statement but not quite succeeding.

Naomi, leaning beseechingly into her father, pleaded, “Tati…”

Eli replied, “Thank you, thank you, for your generosity, for everything, I’d love to, of course, but Samuel is waiting at home, his babysitter can’t stay the night.” It had been decided that Naomi’s younger brother, Samuel, would stay with his father because, as a boy, it was too important that his studies not be interrupted. At the mention of her brother, Naomi’s eyes darkened and, unnoticed by her father, she withdrew into herself. A few minutes of hushed conversation with my mother, a quick kiss on Naomi’s curly head, and he was gone. The only time he came back was six months later to pick her up.

Naomi was the darling of the rabbis at the yeshiva. Although there was a large orthodox Jewish community, surprisingly so for such a small town, we were in the backwater of Jewish thought and scholarship. Naomi, whose gifted mind and—by our provincial standards—rigorous training made her a worthy successor to our grandfather, who had been a well-known rabbi and scholar. The teachers had given up on me, muttering in Yiddish about my grandfather spinning in his grave as I blithely careened from one scrape to the next. For a brief time Naomi was a star, unfolding and softening in the warmth of the focused attention. Yet my most vivid memory of her from that time was waiting for the mailman, her wounded eyes searching for the envelope bearing Eli’s distinctive handwriting, a rare gem hidden amid the bills and advertisements.

* * *

The urgent wail of a siren brought me back. I reached out and touched her face, the flesh unyielding beneath my fingers. My watch said a half hour had passed. I needed to

call someone. 911. I needed to call 911. But there's no emergency, I thought, the emergency is long past. My mind sluggishly began to function.

"I need to report a suicide," the words coming out calmly and competently into my cell phone. I watched from somewhere near the ceiling as I gave all of the details and waited for the paramedics. My other cousin. I needed to call him. I rarely referred to Naomi's brother by name, the same name as our illustrious grandfather. If pressed I'd call him by his full title, "Samuel the Younger, Prince Regent of the Goldstein Throne." It made Naomi giggle. Every time.

"Sammy," I began, even now unable to resist needling him: I knew he hated the diminutive. "Sammy, Mimi's dead." Unconsciously using her childhood nickname made me feel small and forlorn. "I'm here in her apartment. She took pills, I think. The paramedics are on their way. What should I do? Where…"

"Naomi? Dead? But I just saw her, last month it was, I think. It's not possible." He shook his head, a noble horse dislodging a pesky fly. "Pills," he said slowly, the truth beginning to permeate the wall of disbelief. Not again. It can't be. He didn't remember much of his mother's death—he was only eight—just the vague feeling of shame shrouding his family. They never talked about it. He didn't even know how his father, may his name be for a blessing, got his mother buried in the orthodox Jewish cemetery. Suicides were not allowed.

"Sara? I don't know anything about her wishes or even her affairs. We weren't that close. You probably know more about what she wanted. Would she want that rabbi, what's his name, to officiate? Maybe you should organize it. Money isn't a problem; of course I'll pay. After all, she was my only sister."

I let the silence lengthen until it was just a little too uncomfortable. "Okay, I'll do it, but only if you let everyone in the family know; I'll give you the details to pass on." I

had extricated myself from my certifiably crazy family in early adulthood. I'd do this for Naomi, but keeping family contact to a minimum was, I thought, a fair condition. And she wouldn't want the little prick in charge.

Even though I was in my fifties, I had the good fortune to never have arranged a funeral. But I was always efficient and organized. The first step is the rabbi. What is his name? David. David Wishninsky. I knew they had a contentious relationship but he would know who should be contacted. Naomi had often tried to draw me into the Jewish renewal movement but I was an unreconstructed apostate and kept my distance. She never went to rabbinical school, even in the last decade when it was a serious possibility, still bitter that her education as a girl had been a second-class one. Nevertheless, her writings and activism made it possible for a whole new generation of women to join the rabbinate. David's number was in her cell phone. "Rabbi Wishninsky. This is Sara Goldstein, Naomi's cousin. I have bad news." I paused, not quite ready to say the words, to give them flesh and substance.

"Yes," said Rabbi David. "What is it?" he gently prodded.

"It's Naomi. She's dead. Pills. I'm here, at the apartment."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That's terrible. When? When did it happen?"

"I'm here. Still here. Now. At the apartment. Waiting. Paramedics." I didn't seem capable of full sentences, their doughy weight pressing in on me.

"Is anyone with you? Shall I come over?"
The kindness in his voice was undoing me. "No, no thanks. But if you could help me arrange the funeral…" my voice trailing off.

"Of course," he said. "Did she have a will? Leave any instructions?"

"No," I mumbled, unsure of myself now. "We never

discussed such things. I don't know what she wanted. I'll look around and see if I can find any legal documents. There's no note."

"Okay," Rabbi David replied, his professional manner slipping smoothly into place. "You do that. Would you like me to notify members of the community? Officiate?"

"Yes, please." I said gratefully. "I'll call the friends in her address book."

"She was a brilliant woman. Such a clear thinker," he expanded. "We argued often, but I always came away with my ideas sharpened by the clarity of that diamond-hard intelligence. A bit death-obsessed, perhaps."

Suddenly I was furious. You'd be a bit death-obsessed too, pal, if you found your mother hanging from the end of a rope when you were twelve. I choked down the rage, aware at the same time that Naomi, never one to soften an edge, would have said exactly what she thought. "I hear the paramedics coming. I'll call you back." And, in fact, I did hear the heavy footfalls and knock announcing the paramedics.

The two paramedics, one a short, heavy-set Latina and the other a tall, thin white woman—a female Mutt and Jeff—were kind and efficient. The Latina gently suggested that I stand in the tiny kitchen while they removed the body, aware that the concreteness of the act might be hard to watch. I knew she was right but felt that I owed it to Naomi, that someone owed it to her to witness her passage. The sound of the zipper closing on the heavy, black vinyl bag echoes still in my mind's ear: it is the sound of finality.

The apartment felt close and airless after they left. I quickly locked it up and walked uptown to a quiet coffeehouse in Chelsea. Armed with a notebook and a cell phone, I began with the coroner's office. The funeral home would be Jewish, of course, and the details somewhat simplified because the rituals were proscribed for equality in death: a plain pine coffin, a white shroud. Yet the minutiae of death

in America were mind numbing: a service at the funeral home or the synagogue (synagogue would be bigger); how many limousines (3); how many copies of the death certificate (6); motorcycle escort or no (yes); what music (maybe Fran would know).

Fran. Omigod, I have to call Fran. They had been together for nearly five years, the longest and most significant relationship in Naomi's life—that is, after the drearily predictable string of unavailable older men.

"Fran. It's Sara. Oh, sweet Jesus, Fran, Naomi is dead." Not waiting for a response, the whole story, not showing up for breakfast, finding her body, the paramedics, all of it came rushing out.

"What? What? Slow down. Where are you?"

"A coffeehouse in Chelsea. Making calls."

"Come over here," Fran, ever-hospitable, bid me. "We'll do it together. Sandy won't mind." Sandy, her current partner, was incredibly tolerant of Naomi's continued reliance on Fran to entice her from the dark caves of her depressions. Sandy was fundamentally kind in a way that made people smile and want to be around her, warming themselves in her goodness. And she was good for Fran, after the disaster that had been Fran and Naomi. Naomi's swings between neediness and emotional impenetrability were exhausting. The quick, biting wit and intellectual honesty that endeared her to so many of her readers were less endearing when directed, unleavened, at oneself. It was a long five years, crisis upon crisis. I loved my cousin, but the truth is that I liked Fran better.

I took a cab crosstown to the East Side apartment where Fran and Sandy lived in an old building, whose glory days, though long past, could still be glimpsed in the lobby's marble flooring and walnut paneling of the creaky elevator with the iron gate. Sandy quickly opened the door to my timid knock and I was swathed in the comforting, mingled smells of coffee, frying onions, and books. Books were

everywhere, in the bookcases lining most of the walls, in piles on the desks, chairs, and tables. Sandy gently pushed me into an overstuffed armchair, and without a word, handed me a cup of coffee and a huge plate of scrambled eggs. Obediently, I shoveled down the food, simultaneously realizing just how hungry I was.

Fran sat on the couch across from me, waiting until I finished eating. We looked at each other for a long moment, then her eyes slid away from mine as she asked, "Tell me what needs to be done."

"Fran, it's not your fault."

She flicked away my clumsy attempt at comfort. "I hadn't seen her in weeks. I just needed a break. Maybe, if I…"

I moved across to the couch, held her hands in mine and made her look at me. I knew what she really meant. "Fran. Even if you hadn't left her—and you were choking in that relationship—it wouldn't have stopped her. It wouldn't have changed anything. It's like her soul was unhappy. I don't know what makes us the way we are. Sure, her childhood sucked. I think her mother's suicide left a track in a path that should not have footprints, gave her permission to see it as a solution. But there was something in her that couldn't take in love even when it was offered, like she was missing a critical enzyme to digest it."

As I talked, Fran leaned into me and we held each other. I could see Sandy over Fran's shoulder. She mouthed "Thank you" as she quietly slipped back into the kitchen. We slowly disengaged, straightening scarves and shirts, and, like dueling cowboys of the old west, drew our cell phones and began making calls.

The funeral would be impressive. She was, after all, a public figure. They would come in the hundreds: those whose lives she touched through her writings, those for whom she was a pioneer, a fierce warrior. Our family would be well represented, rows of men in dark suits and wrinkled

white shirts, women in unfashionably high-necked dresses and scarves covering their offending hair, swarms of children dressed as miniatures of their parents. There would even be a few reporters, a small obit in The New York Times. Fran would be there, out of respect, for who she was, for who they had been, and Sandy as well. And men and women who thought of themselves as her friends. But would anyone mourn her, would anyone wake in the chill dawn and taste the emptiness where she had been, would anyone turn and say, look, over there, forgetting for a moment her passing, before the weight of her absence presses down? Not even me. I'd think of her in the years to come with a sad shake of my head: a life wasted, barren of love. Did her fierce courage provide a counterweight in the cosmic balance? Tell me, please, what is the measure of a life?

Wilmer Mills

Light for the Laundromat

Mostly evenings now I bring
My kinks and wrinkles of the week
To wash, then wait in front of rows
Of glass-door dryers curling waves
Of laundered clothing, some damp,
Some near their quarter's stopping place.
The hot machines are best to watch.
Light garments tumble dry and loose
And play their cyclical charades
With empty sleeves and cuffs, winning
Hands down, since who could guess the scenes
And shapes they feign to motion for.
It's possible my mother could.
She used to point at clouds and name
The elephants and bears of air
Piled up above our river home,
The river in Brazil where half-
Dressed women lined the banks to wash.
I must confess I found them bronze
And beautiful, and when their clothes
Were hung to dry I thought the sun
Had made them clean and not the soap.

This was the mission field of shine
For which my father had forsaken
Heritage and farm. He preached
About the light of the world that made
A body beautiful within
And purified its inner raiment.
I, too, believed and took his faith
When chills and fever made me freeze

And sweat through every sheet and blanket.
But looking out to where my own
Malarial bed sheets were hung,
I knew that sunlight made them clean
Because it happened several times
That fever brought a river girl
To wipe my legs with alcohol.
Each time I pointed, "Look she's by
The window," all they saw was glass,
White paint, and then my chills came back,
And she dissolved through cane-seat chairs
Below the sill and lit the floor
With little octagons of light.

Here tonight, in the laundromat,
The faces turn and turn. The lights
Are all florescent so they buzz
Above a wall of casement windows
Trying to hold the darkness out.
I didn't want to come this late
But had to since my button-downs
Resembled poorly folded maps
Of land where all the trees are gone.

The dryers one by one have stopped.
Their free-association game
Of animated arms is over.
I saw only shirts bowed low
In rows, becoming lighter, sleeves
Spread out so anyone could guess
The posture in their pantomime,
A pose of praise for laundering light
In that subcontinent of sun.

Monorhyme for my Wife at Forty

O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love loves not to have years told.
--Shakespeare, Sonnet 138

She tells me how she needs her beauty sleep,
A lie, but I've seen her sleeping late and deep
When everyone is up and has to creep
In sock feet all around the house to keep
From waking her.
But what is "beauty sleep?"
Was being young expendable and cheap
To make the price of middle age so steep?

She swears, "No, really, I just *need* my sleep,
So I believe her if she lies to keep
The cost of aging down. Do I not reap
The benefit by sight, as when I sweep
Her covers back and feel my innards leap?

Though beauty *needs* no rest to stay this deep,
I lie along with her and let her sleep.

Ice Cream Angel

We took our children to the carousel,
A place in town where abandoned factoriesHave long-since been replaced with little shopsAnd restaurants, and now a coffee house.We rode them round and round until they tiredAnd clamored for an ice cream cone. "OK,"I said, "just one, and then we have to go."Inside the ice cream shop we found our seatsAnd saw a woman several tables downWho leaned her chair against the wall and lickedHer cone. At sixty-five, with plastic shoes,Print dress, a ratty purse, and wiry hair,
She wasn’t like the other customers.She coughed, and something in the sound of itHad nearly made me vomit. Then she said:
"Y'all's got nice children. Must'a trained 'em right."I looked around and really shouldn't have;She had her index finger up her noseAnd pulled it out all bloody to the knuckle,Saying again, "Y’all's got some purdy children."Then she told us how she’d never married;“Never had no children;” came from HuntsvilleBack in the sixties; worked in factories,And also "here," this very ice cream shopThat used to be a hardware/mercantile.She still comes back because she loves the place."I gots a ton of memories," she said,And didn't tell us, though I half-way guessedHow she was not so ugly then. I wondered:
Is she an aging prostitute? Did she
Not screw the man who used to own the place Because he let her live upstairs rent-free?Was there a time back in the stockroom dark
When he had hiked her dress, when she had thought
For just a second that she loved the man? My dirty mind imagined how she did,

Why she comes back, for love, the way she feltAlive inside
the body he desired. I had her number.
                    But just before we left,
We heard, “Y’all must be doing something right.Yer kids are
gonna be just fine...don't worry."
The hair rose up on the back of my neck. *We had*
Been worried, hadn't we? The children. The ache
Of them, carved as they were like pretty horses
That circled us and waited for the chance
To gallop off.
              Did someone say, “Fear not?”
Not quite, but almost that. I whipped around,But she was
gone as if she'd disappeared.
And isn’t that what angels do, the extra-
Ordinary in the ordinary,
The supernatural made natural?
I won’t forget her cough and bloody finger,
The glisten on her snaggle tooth,
Eyes closed, the smile gone bodiless
To spoon our palms, our necks,
The arches of our feet.

Buying Your Perfume

The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.
--W.B. Yeats

It can't be something obvious to most--
More subtle like the revenant or ghost
Of a flower, lingering after the air and dew
Of dawns that are no more.
The wine of yearning…
The memory of apples…

And so with this I'll look for you
In all the little gardens of the morning.

Molly Minturn

The Book of Common Prayer

Turn on every light in the house.
Open each door, your life
an advent calendar

where we can all be free, quietly.
That late-night prank at summer camp,
a canoe on the dark lake, underwear

woven into a quilt, covering the raft.
In the morning let it remain, fluttering
lace and hearts, encircled by water

and pines. Behind each door
your father, a baby in an incubator, fists
startling against his face, white peonies.

Your brother in a newspaper crown,
standing on the king-size bed,
his bloody lip, his eyes closed,

listening to the dead. Strings
of light around the birdbath
all through the winter. Your mother

at the window waiting for the sparrows.
She does not turn around. The sorrow
of her shoulders framed in the window.

Speak her name and she will return.

Thorpe Moeckel

Yondering

We drove up Buffalo Road and then cut on good gravel over Garden Mountain, wound around Sugarloaf and Painter – way out past the old Dudley place, sky a raw milk, cold enough for the rime to stay in blossom all day, rhododendron leaves curled up, too. We ended over Mill Creek way, at the top by Smith Branch, hugged in among Middle and Brushy and Sandbank, mountains that look more gentle than they feel when you're in them hunting tangles where grouse might be.

It was a day in December, my friend Greg Whitt and his dog Lily and me. The woods were a lake of leaves and deadfall and stone. Not everywhere was the water stiff with cold. It dropped in places too quickly for that.
This was shale country, the Alleghany front. Picture a centipede and you'll see, scaled down, how the water drained for miles, how it ran together. This was cutover paper company land. This was the line where the counties changed names – Rockbridge, Botetourt. This wasn't nowhere but it was as close as we could get without having to go real far.

Lily's a German shorthair, a year old the past October – she's Greg's first. He's been training her according to books and local knowledge, but like a lot of young dogs, she hasn't seen enough birds. We hoped to help fix that today. I said as much to her as we wound around another long curve, brown mass of mountains, the sky ponderous and lovely, Greg all fired up by a grapevine mass close to pulling its host tree down.

"It's like a vineyard in there," he said. Lily, as if in response, stole up between the buckets from the backseat, her nutty, fierce eyes, ears tuned to the song of rocks under

tire, and she gave Greg a little lick on the neck without looking at him, saying let's get there, I care about you and those grapevines, sure, but I want to run those woods, I want to follow my nose. She turned then and slipped aft. I glanced back and saw the lean dog, rump foreword. She was rubbing her snout in my coat, which reminded me it hadn't been washed since the hog butchering a few days prior.

Lily's liver-ticked the way shorthairs are, and she moves like she's part cutting horse and part grasshopper, lean and trotty, bouncing and leaping and galloping, prancing or trancing, almost flying, too, when necessary. Her brown patches are islands among an archipelago of smaller brown spots, the white a kind of sea. She's a walking mural of gingerbread cookies, in other words. My favorite patch is two circles joined like an eight, a solid one, with a little three quarter circle, also solid liver, bulging off of it.

We were descending a long curve now. Greg was taking it pretty fast in the old Blazer. For a while, you could see so far to the north I wondered if we hadn't paid an admission fee.

"Greg," I said.

"Yo."

"You have a beautiful dog," I said. "But her tail reminds me of a scrap of PVC. There's one in our tool shed -- same length and width – but I couldn't find it the other day."

"That's it," he said. "Sorry, I meant to tell you."

Solemnity has a thin bladder, and we had punctured it. The miraculous thing is, she has more than one. This was shaping up to be a fine day.

Where we parked by the National Forest gate at Smith Flats, there were two trucks, steel cages in the beds -- bear hunters. Lily, eager to get going, slashed about the woods while we geared up and chatted with one of the bear guys, a big bearded man. He was friendly. When Lily returned and was checking the scent on this new human, he gave her some loving, clearly admiring. And we were friend-

ly back to the man, especially when he started in with reconnaissance. “Flushed two yonder,” he said, looking at us over Lily’s ear. “A few days ago, but it was right up there not even a mile.”

“We won’t be in your way?” Greg asked.

“No,” he said. “Billy’s off the other direction. Our hounds treed a sow and cub.” His voice was flatter now, a bit lackluster, like he’d been hoping for a big boar. I don’t know much about hunting bear and don’t have any interest in hunting them, but I do know that the few cuts of bear meat I’ve eaten over the years were delicious, nutty and of a texture and taste that seemed a rendering of the mountains’ very essence.

Behind the man, off the gravel in a pile of dumped brush, lay a coyote, stiff, its upper lip upfurled. I looked at it from a distance while Greg and the bear hunter kept talking. It was a big animal, darker than grey, fifty pounds or so. It seemed to have been dead a while and yet it looked as if it could pounce on us at any moment. The bear hunter didn’t acknowledge it. Greg didn’t either, not until later when Lily showed a nervous interest in the brush pile.

We hunted then. We went where the man said they’d flushed two. No grouse emerged. We went another yonder and then another few yonders. I like yondering, when where you’re going isn’t all planned out but figured on the fly, something to do with a tip and the terrain and the dog and her nose and the promise of game. Your pace determines it, to a small extent, and the weather and season, too. Most of what puts you where you are is so close to the heart as to be illegible and perfect. Any time is good for yondering, but winter has its perks, especially in the wooded uplands of Western Virginia -- there’s less foliage, more room.

You could see North Mountain and Ad Cox Knob and Bearwallow Mountain, too, but mostly we saw a lot of brush and leaves and limbs and moss where we were stepping, where we were crackling the lobes and veins, looking

out for greenbriar and grapevines and ankle twisters, steep ground, the dog's bell clanging, our whistles now and then calling her to stay close, work this way, slash that, her tail docked and tense, wagging now and then, up even then like a fin for balance.

We walked up and we walked down. Hours passed. The sun stayed behind the clouds, and the earth moved, and we moved across a small, vast part of it. We walked across and down and up and up and across and down. We back-tracked. We looped. We sat down against trees and we drank water and ate bread and cheese and spoke a little, mostly to the dog, to Lily, saying good girl, stay close, find a bird. The walking was good. It was all about picturing everywhere you ever will and won't be and were and are at all times of day and night and year. How else can you look for something unless in every corner of experience. How else can you find that something when you likely never will.

Lily kept stopping. Her bell would quit and Greg and I would tense up in expectation. Then we'd see her. She'd be squatting the way female dogs do. She stopped often, every twenty minutes or so. She was in heat. Greg said it made her a little erratic. I couldn't tell. I know dirt about bird dogs except I like them. I go out there with Lily and Greg because I like to tromp around in woods that are new to me. New woods are new woods, good in their own right, and also good for renewing one's appreciation in the old, regular haunts.

My most regular haunt is the eighteen acres where my wife, daughter, and I feed ourselves on the slew of animals and soil and plants we work – hogs, sheep, milk goats, ducks, chickens, rabbits, and a big garden. A person is many things and many feelings, but I've come to feel an intoxicating satisfaction upon returning, after a day or more in wild country, to the rituals of care that raising food demands, all the surprises among the routines that grow, over time, a little more intimate – the crunch of an old coffee can digging in a

feed bin, water in the rain barrel slopping into an old spackle bucket, all the grunts and mews, quacks and clucks. Lately, the feel and sound of manure and mulch slipping off our shovels onto the garden beds had taken the sting off of a hard situation at my job. That situation was way off the radar today; in our first mile of walking, it was sighted somewhere south of Cape Horn, among the icebergs.

Of course, I like carrying the old over and under, knowing it's loaded, my fingertip aware of where the safety is, each of the two triggers. The promise of firing on game is forever a strong and personal pull, but seeing some new country, seeing a lot of wonders even if it doesn't amount to seeing a grouse or shouldering the stock, releases the safety on the senses and on desire, which are always tangled up in memory. Several times as we worked those woods, as they worked us, I heard the drumming of grouse in my head, way down between the ears, those lawnmower-like eruptions I hadn't heard since fishing the Jackson a few springs back.

The trees, by the way, were not a chorus. Except for the broken ones. The more a tree grows, the more it reaches down, night the only foliage one would ever care to count on.

For days – and I had a sense of this then -- my knees' pockets would be full of shale. It was hard walking, usually is on these outings. Every smile had some grimace. Look, I wanted to tell you a story about grouse and now you've got one that's not about where everything is coming from or where it is going, the stones sewing new jackets from the cloud's whittlings.

At some point, Greg said, "It's wild country this way for days, two hundred miles – maybe more."

"Any roads?" I asked. We were stopped on a flat, a kind of false summit. Greg finished drinking some water and offered me the canteen.

"A few," he said.

I trust Greg's knowledge of the region. He's fished

and hunted all over these nooks since childhood, and his appetite for local history gleaned from books and locals runs as deep as he wears it gently. He often travels the back roads of Western Virginia in his work as an environmental engineer, sampling soil and water and overseeing the remediation of contaminated grounds – healthcare for the land. Essential, it seems, to his doing good work are the relationships he strikes up with people on the jobsite and in the small towns, his infectious love of nature and culture regularly inspiring them to relate stories about their own places and people. Greg often shares snippets of these experiences with me, but the spring he was involved in the cleanup after the Virginia Tech shootings, he offered very little, except that he was there, and I wasn't going to ask.

The day was progressing nicely. Those who claim that a scarcity of game inspires you to hunt harder are on to something; whether you hunt better is another story. The clouds seemed to share their thickness and endurance with us, but they kept their heaviness to themselves. And though the dirt was frozen, you could fall all the same. I busted my butt a few times. It was that steep in places. You had to use your hand, the one not holding the gun. The grip of the ground was the grip of the cold. We went and we went and for a map we looked at Lily and we looked at the trees, at the bark, the limbs, all the joinery.

Every now and then, I had to imagine living there forever. Not to do so would have been irresponsible.

We were squirming through the dense new growth of a clearcut when I came into a small opening and discovered the skeleton of a buck. Many of the bones were missing, but the upper part of the skull was intact, the two outermost of the six thick tines gnawed a fair bit by mice. I couldn't see or hear Greg through the trees. It was a damp, icy place, a seep, golden sedges matted every which way. I squatted there and let my breathing subside to regular. There's no good place to die, but this looked as fine a place as any. I

thought of the coyote and figured it and this buck had probably known each other, at least by scent. It seemed we weren't that far from the truck, having circled around, but there was something intensely private and remote about the spot now. My eyes went from the knobby base of the tines to a small beech, its leaves sharp, parchmenty. I wanted to linger but had to get going. Being a collector of sorts, I hung the skull by its rack through the straps of my game vest and starting walking again, awkward with the new bulk. Lily's bell clanged not too far ahead.

More hours passed. You still couldn't see the sun or its outline behind the dense and darkening clouds, but the big star was lower on the horizon – the quality of light said so, and the light seemed an accurate meter for the remaining energy in our legs. We had pushed a lot of covers with no points from Lily and no grouse. My gun seemed to be putting on weight. Snow began to drop, big flakes. Greg said, "This is last summer's burn." We had come over some ridge or other and were out on a rise between drainages – just over from some old iron mines where we'd paused for a look, little caves and stone piles that Greg connected with a furnace on Mill Creek he said was operated until the 1850's by the Tredegar Iron Works out of Richmond. Where we stood on the rise, it was hard to look at the burn line on the stumps without imagining the heat. Greg was to still my left – him a righty with the gun and I the opposite. Lily, meanwhile, worked the scarred ground roughly thirty yards out, tail tight back and forth, bell the sound of something later than old.

"Not much food in here," I said.

"Not much," Greg said. We'd been working the burn for a little while. Where we'd brushed them, charred sticks and stumps had smeared our boots and pants with black marks. What greenbriar remained was yellow. "Let's cut across the contour – find the edge of this," Greg went on. "They could be piled up in there."

We hunted the edge with new degrees of hope. The

cover was good there -- a recent clearcut, some grapevine, laurel, greenbriar among the young trees. Turkeys had been scratching the duff -- dark, rich soil littered with acorn husks – and a few deerprints were frozen in one of the cleared spots.

The snow didn't last long. And there were purples, yes, but even the gray could not speak of them. I mean we were lucky sometimes and we saw each tree as its taproot sees the crown. But we were luckiest because for much of that day we were unknown to ourselves. We wanted nothing, least of all the smell of pollen.

Later, there was a grouse. It flushed sixty yards off, from down in a gulch beyond the edge of a clearcut, far from where we were headed and far from Lily. We turned and went the yonder it had flown. We crossed the bottom and walked edgeways across the contour up the slope. Soon, we heard it flush again. It was a ways off, beyond the dog. We heard it, we both said so. And we saw things in that hearing and in that saying so. There were big oaks in there, some poplar.

Timothy Murphy

Changing Of The Guard

If I search far enough back in their pedigrees, I find that all five of my Labradors have descended from FC, CNFC Trieven Thunderhead, son of Super Chief sired by Paha Sapa. That's just the paternal line. On their mothers' side two of them descend from Candlewood's Tanks-a-Lot, surely the greatest competitor in history. Bitches are at a distinct disadvantage, it being in the interest of their breeder/trainers to keep them pregnant in the whelping box. She won the National Field Championship in three of four years, and I am deeply indebted to her for the puppies she threw, my dogs' closer antecedents.

I knew that Elmwood's Bold Fenian, aka Feeney, would be trouble as he screamed in my lap on the 49th day of his life as I drove him home. I put him to sleep two weeks ago. At age twelve dove season had been too much for him. Novox, condroiton, glucosamine, nothing worked, and his hindquarters gave out.

Feeney was trained by Carl Altenbernd of Gun Dog Kennels, who acquired him from Steve Blythe of Lone Willow Kennels. Almost always hunting solo with his not-very-good gunner, Feeney harvested about 2000 doves, grouse, ducks and pheasants in his career, a remarkable run. At age one Carl couldn't get him to sit at a distance on a blind retrieve. So he buckled two TriTronics straps together and fastened the shock collar under Feeney's groin. It was a horror to behold, but it worked. Part of Carl's genius is knowing just how much a bull-headed male puppy can endure.

Crazed though he was, Feeney was the smartest dog I ever knew. Though Carl had told me, "When he's ten you'll be able to keep up with him," Feeney figured out right away

that my killing range was forty yards and rarely went beyond it. And he figured out right away that pheasants dropped by my 28 or 20 often took off running. His first cripple chase was at four months when I dropped a bird way beyond my range in unmowed grass and he came up with it fifty yards from the fallen feathers. He trusted his nose, and I trusted him.

He became a celebrated retriever as *Gray's Sporting Journal* published poem after Feeney poem, and he dominated my *Hunter's Log*, a book with thirty years of black lab poems. 2011 was really his swan song, and I want to incorporate into this prosimetrum two accounts in verse of some of Feeney's final hunts. Here is his dove opener:

The Trautman Gelbvieh Ranch

I. Maggie, Feeney, Stevie and Timmy

The Holy Grail? To fill within the box,
fifteen birds with twenty-five rounds or less.
I beg Michael the Archangel to bless
the Mojodoves whirring above our blocks
in stubble. From their batrachian pillows
frogs are waking; and from riparian willows
here come the doves to meet our murderous noise.
Dogs will be pups, and grown men will be boys.

September 5, 2010

II. A Dove Too Far

Not yet dawn and it's seventy-eight degrees,
the humidity is pushing ninety-eight.
Low overcast, doves hold in their dripping trees,
mosquitoes in their millions hum in wait.
Not fit for man or dog, but forth we go,
wishing we hunted pheasant cocks in snow.

Our fifth dove sails into the corn test plot.
I mark it and line Feeney down the row,
following him, cursing my too-long shot.
I hear it fluttering, trying to fly, to know
the freedom of unfettered skies again,
and blame "this limitless trait in the hearts of men."

I find it dog-slobbered, flightless and stunned
at a ploughed pathway through this test plot field.
Feeney has left it for me. I have gunned
for thirty years here and never seen such a yield.
But no Feeney. My dog has gone to ground.
After the combines, will his corpse be found?
I need to realize that he's now eleven
and cannot hunt like a young male anymore.
After an hour he limps from rooster heaven,
and I race him to the Maple River's shore
to give him a dog paddle, let him cool down,
then truck my aging athlete back to town.

September 1, 2011

III. Reconciliation

Steve Trautman called. "Thanks for the draft," he said,
"I've got a better place, an abandoned yard,
wheat stubble where the retrieving's not so hard."
Cold front comes through. I plant my decoy spread
just past the farmstead trees, near to the river,
then shoot my Holy Grail in the morning dew.
Thirty minutes of action, and we're through,
Feeney's my friend again, my fond forgiver.

September 2, 2011

Last Rides Together

I. Not Skunked, but Totally Skunked

We've walked four miles, and Feeney's longtime limp
suddenly worsens. There's aspirin in the truck.
We flushed not so much as a hen, worse luck.
Five feet behind me trails my aging gimp

when a swamp monster roars out of the crop.
Steven and I fire simultaneously.
Down goes the cock which Feeney doesn't see,
and Maggie blasts right past the pheasant's drop,

quartering into the wind, behind a runner?
Steve sprints, kicks at a scrub oak deadfall, sunk
on the prairie. Brave Maggie points a skunk
which blasts her in the nose. The slower gunner

strolls to the drop. The cock is tunneled, dead
in the tall weeds ten feet from where he fell,
blasted, bled out and bound for rooster hell.
I kneel to scratch my sage retriever's head.

Stevie is in a state approaching wrath:
rubdown with ketchup first, and then stage two,
tomato juice, Johnson's Baby Shampoo.
Maggie, disgraced, goes home to take her bath.

II. In My Boots, Not In My Bed

Feeney was too wiped out to wake last night
when I crooned Robert Burns, turned out his light
and dreamed him dead. Strangely, I wasn't grieved,
glad for the trophy rooster he retrieved
now bubbling, stewing in my gumbo pot.

Slow, then slower, Feeney's and Murphy's lot.
This year, no floundering in drifted snow,
but heart attack afield? That's how I'd go,
my corpse scavenged by foxes, found in spring
when migrant swans and ducks are on the wing
and winter wheat stages into the stool.
My friends will say, "Tim was a hunting fool."

III. Monday Morning

Two nights of rest. Feeney is fit to go.
The Olson Section has been hunted hard,
the cocks flockshot into the posted yard.
They will be slow and sleepy, that I know.

Bob Olson planted trees here, row on row,
lilac, spruces, chokecherry, summit ash
shadowing ponds where blue-winged mallards splash.
Bob sold me this farm. In blowing snow,

Indian Summer, I have hunted here
twenty-five years. I load my Twenty-eight,
open and close the pasture's creaking gate
where Feeney knows the trees for which we steer.

Four shells, three cocks shot in the heart or head.
The days of man are grass, King David said.

In July, home came Chucky, Lone Willow's Cuchulain. He was death on Feeney, hanging from an ear, chewing at his neck, but the old master loved the attention. Midway through September the score was Feeney, 43 doves, Chucky, 0. So I let Feeney sleep in my bedroom, changed to hunting togs in the basement, and smuggled out Chucky in the dark for his first solo forays. As best I can puzzle out the pedigrees, Chucky is Feeney's great, great nephew. He needs to

wear a choke collar and check cord, for when he gets his bird (he's at 25 retrieves at day 130 of his life), he thinks the proper destination for his triumph is in the next zip code. Here is his first pheasant:

Passing the Torch

He pointed his first pheasant, then he pounced.
It crashed into a shaven soybean field
but took off running; and the puppy trounced
our target with a passion labs can wield,
full somersault on impact in his glee,
then fetched his flapping trophy to my knee.

Two years ago I wrote a poem here.
I had a winged bird twenty feet away
from Puppy's flush. Though young dogs rummaged near,
old Betty found him. That was her last great day
before the cancer. Now my eyes well up.
I watched her somersaulting as a pup.

In my preface to *Hunter's Log*, and in James Babb's introduction to my book, we discuss the lessons we've learned from Ortega y Gasset's *Meditations on Hunting*, chief of which is this, that each hunt is a practice session for our mortality. I guess I've most centrally addressed this theme in my poem "Pass Shooter," first published by *Gray's*, then in *Hunter's Log*.

Pass Shooter (IV)

Meditations on Hunting: years ago,
corn strips, the winter food plots in these fields
held all the birds our Olson Section yields
when the ploughed soil is flecked with fallen snow.

Two brothers and their labrador, footworn,
worked to the wind. Their father capped the drive,
never quite so alert, quite so alive
as when his sons were coming through the corn.

Arthritic, diabetic, short of breath,
he'd seen the sun rise on a mallard blind.
Ortega y Gasset much on his mind,
his hunts were dress rehearsals for his death.

Acts X, 13

In Heaven you'll be twenty-five years old
but know all that you learned in your long lives.
You'll leave the Elysian Fields to bed young wives
once every week. You'll never have to scold
two-year-old dogs. Each bird you shoot, released,
will fly to summon sunrise in the East.
New snow will fall. It will be cool, not cold.

Sam Adams' Ale is running in the creeks,
never a badger nor a rabid skunk
to threaten pups, and when the sun has sunk
and evening's flush is rising in your cheeks,
you'll sit in council at our Father's feet,
sober as angels or a novice monk,
to hear Him say "Rise, Peter, kill and eat."

Steve Myers

Haircuts

Backdropped by acres of township shacks and distant ridges,
five guys in the front yard stand around in sweaters,
tan slacks, and snappy fedoras, barely moving, not
looking at each other, a scene blocked for an indie movie
with no one to call "roll picture." Can't get a good read
on their ages, and since the virus, does it even matter?
They stare down the highway till they dissolve in a pall
of fog, thick with the cries of unseen ibis. At the cross
roads
behind us, it won't be long till the morning's first patron
steps into the gap where a door used to be and disappears.

Imagine the barber, his powder dry and at the ready,
his sheet cinched at the adam's apple. Part artist, part sur-
geon,
he rests his razor under the jawbone, then draws it upward,
gathers up lather, flicks it into an old tin can. There's no
running water. It's in no one's best interest to break the
skin.

Volunteers

And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.
--"Drummer Hodge"

Nothing was connecting here
and home, what we were
with what we'd been,
"classroom" and "service
learning"—there was a mother,
dying of the virus,
and her filth-encrusted
daughter, and the willowy girl
from Frackville, Pennsylvania,
the way the water
sluiced through her fingers
as she bathed the child
in the yard beside a mound
of red dirt and rubble
from which had sprung the stem
and leaves and tendrils
of a single seedling pumpkin,
which I might have seen
as the seal on a covenant
still unfolding, except
I knew no rain would fall
for weeks to come—but then
the boy with the backpack
looked down at it and said
the name of Hardy's drummer,

one of the works we'd read
"back there" to better
prepare us, as March showers
spattered the windows, as they did
in Dorset while the old man
wrote what might have been
the saddest verse ever to appear
in English, at least for a day
or so, until, walking out
to observe his fellow villagers
again, he returned to his dark
study and wrote another.

In this, the other hemisphere,

reflected in a window of the Paris plane,
this black South African paralympian,
a genuine wheelchair basketball star. Imagine
Hephaestus—his upper body halcyon
summer, his lower, winter—with the tongue
of Phoebus Apollo and the downtown
set shot of World B. Free, which doesn't begin
to tell you how fluid, how soft-spoken,
how beautiful he is, using a version
of his spin move to slip inside the magician's
cabinet of a W.C. like splitting a baseline
double-team, yet no more beautiful than
the Afrikaner rugby player in his green
Springbok team jacket we'd flown into town
with weeks before, a ruck-and-maul man,
his legs twin marmoreal columns, his attention
fixed on "Alien Blasters" and Horton
Hears a Who from take-off to touchdown
ten hours later.

Gaborone
on our left wing, bloody Harare right, Martin
Scorcese's Shine a Light on the movie screen,
Keith Richards spinning sorrow into glittering fortune:
You got the silver, the gold, the diamonds in the mine,
he assures the woman with the flashing eyes , glisten
of his skull ring on one hand, in the other, a fag-end
burning for all it's worth through the old blues tune.

Derek Otsuji

Every Blessed Thing

Ladybug, dew-bejeweled,
slumbering on a bud,
dazzling to behold
a thing bedizened so,
your coruscating dome
star studded as few
casts, rife ridden
in celebrity, can hope
to rival. You out-blazon all
audacity, pinnacle of
the decadent expressed
as diamond-crusted
brooch by Schlumberger.
The lavish crystal beading
stuns, but with faceted
aspect softened by liquid's
fleshy delicacy, the bright-
blurred quality edging
round remembered elements
in dreams, which in the end
escapes the heaped-up
praise, the voluminous
plaudits, vain rhapsodies,
and leaves us bereft,
and of the garden
dispossessed—we
the hunger humbled,
bumbling over beauty,
latticed bauble work
of slow drawn dawn's
silver distillery—O ladybird
beetle, jewel-endued,
slumbering on a bud.

Joshua Roberts

Le Voyage dans la Lune

Three chopes into this night's visit to La Chope du Chateau
Rouge
(40 rue de Clignancourt, just down Montmartre's hill from
the room where I'm living out
my midlife sabbatical, my halfway-to-the-grave escapade,
a stay of indeterminate length -- weeks? months? --
my personal voyage dans la Lune
until the money or courage runs out and I'm forced back to
Earth,
kick the sub-lettor out of my Brooklyn one-bedder,
see if I can get my business out of the freezer and figure how
to survive in America again),

I visit the bar's convenience and there's the porcelain
floorplate with its two footprints
bracketing the drain
as if to steady the veriest drunk (which I'm not yet quite),

And there is no getting around the resemblance those sunken
white ridge-soled prints bear
to those pressed eternally into lunar dust by the Apollonians
(all right, quite drunk),

Neil Armstrong first and foremost among them and dead this
morning I learned,
the news across the time zones still humbling me as I stand
in the small room's
ordained small steps,
a gulf wider than any giant leap can bridge between my
history and Armstrong's,

his bootprints on the Moon (the Moon, always and necessari-
ly capitalized) forever.

-- And even that thought is a failure, self-pity squared,
as I hereby confess it's not me in Paris this summer at all but
my cousin,
his exploits I'm channeling, his voyage, his courage and not
mine at all,
trying it on for literary size but it's an awkward fit, stuck
here on the sofa in humid South Philly
when my cousin's phone snapped the picture in the WC and
batted it across the Atlantic,
subject-lined "Here's another one"
to be saved in the folder with all the rest (famous graves in
Père Lachaise, snappy storefronts and street art),
this is what happens when you don't make plans, you watch
everyone else live out theirs, life down to one mere
step at a time,
a rut, one foot not even in front of the other.

David Scronce

Café Nicholson, 1949

On the photo by Karl Bissinger

The woman carrying the tray, who might she be?
Supercilious Cigarette is Tennessee,
Golden Youth, staring vacantly, is Gore.
Opposite stands Tanaquil, leaning forward.
Two bottles of Chianti, glasses with lees
Meander to the profile of a woman
Who could be Louise Bogan,
Or Jeanne Moreau if this were France,
This bistro garden, tree-embraced.
But who's the serving woman, smiling, dark faced,
White serviette draped across the wrist
That balances the tray, whose figure rephrases
The vanishing point, this muse of artists' afternoons
Who holds the whole tableau in place?

Timothy Steele

A Visitor

I stop cold, having misinterpreted
The large, brown-yellow, lozenge-patterned rock.
I make out, in its midst, an arrowed head
Whose still, black-pupiled eyes are taking stock.
The mass rolls supple coils within itself;
I back off, yielding it the deck's warm shelf.

The rattle, shivered, gives a meaning buzz.
He's not inviting me to a debate.
He's come forth, as in spring he always does,
In search of food and water and a mate.
The corner of the deck is a retreat
Where he collects himself and soaks up heat.

I trim plants, mindful that he's resting there.
In due course, he uncoils; I watch him slide
His upper body out into mid-air
Above the canyon and sway side to side.
Locating an oak shrub, he feeds his length
Down through it with unhurried, fluid strength.

The poet Lawrence tells how, one hot day,
A like guest visited his water trough
And how, in panic and to his dismay,
He hurled a log at it to drive it off.
He saw the creature as an exiled king
And felt shame, having done so mean a thing.

Fear all too often cancels sympathy.
I hope the fates that manage our affairs
Ensure that, if my snake revisits, we
Don’t come upon each other unawares
But can give one another a wide berth
As fellow mortal pilgrims on the earth.

That way, I may observe him without dread
As he suns, coiled, or as he winds among
The potted plants; and he may lift his head
To take me in and flick at me his tongue
Before returning, under no duress,
From my raised garden to his wilderness.

William Wenthe

Big Data

> If you can work with vast amounts of data and comprehend it, you are the future.
>
> —*The New York Times*

In a warm late-March just before dusk,
my four-year old daughter says Listen—crickets.

And damned if I don't first time this year
hear the small song emerge

from hedges of our fourscore
and seventeen year-old neighbor

who walks, bent to the question mark
of his body. Data, shmata.

Today I deduce hope for the future.

Gail White

Statues of Antinous

are everywhere and you run into them
in unexpected places -- Amsterdam,
New York, Vienna -- where you recognize
a teenage boy who might have taken off
his clothes to change for soccer, with a mop
of curly hair all brushed one way, a nose
like Nefertiti's, and a sulky mouth --
you'd know him anywhere, as if you'd seen
his photograph, as if he might turn up
delivering a pizza. While you might
walk by Saint Paul and never notice him,
you can't miss young Antinous. And not
because he did a single thing. He simply caught
the emperor's eye. His immortality
was Hadrian's love. With cities, obelisks,
and marble busts, the emperor deified
a face that still lays criticism flat.
Does anyone love you as much as that?

Anne Whitehouse

Zen Rider

Caspar is a great jumper
but all who try to ride him
end up in his favorite ditch.
At last it is my turn.

From the quietest place in my heart
I tap into his will and his need,
at one with the pulse of his breath
as he gallops across the fields.

CONTRIBUTORS

M. C. Allan's poetry and fiction have appeared in *Linebreak, Blackbird, VQR, Tar River Poetry*, and other publications. She is a graduate of the creative writing program at Hollins University and works as an editor and writer for the Humane Society of the United States. She lives in the Washington, D.C., area with her husband, food writer Tim Carman, and their beagle, Lucinda Piggly-Wiggly. When not feeding aforementioned beagle or eating with aforementioned husband, she occasionally blathers at ecstaticdoggerel.blogspot.com.

Claire Bateman's books are: *Locals* (Serving House Books, 2012), *The Bicycle Slow Race* (Wesleyan University Press, 1991), Friction (Eighth Mountain Poetry Prize, 1998), *At the Funeral of the Ether* (Ninety-Six Press, 1998), *Clumsy* (New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2003), *Leap* (New Issues, 2005), *Coronology* (a chapbook, single long poem, Serving House Books, 2009), and *Coronology* (and other poems) (Etruscan Press, 2010). She has been awarded Individual Artist Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Tennessee Arts Commission, and the Surdna Foundation, as well as two Pushcart Prizes. She has taught at Clemson University, the Fine Arts Center, and various workshops and conferences. She lives in Greenville, SC, and is poetry editor of the *St. Katherine Review*.

Charlie Bondhus has published two books of poetry: *What We Have Learned to Love*, which won Brickhouse Books' 2008-2009 Stonewall Competition, and *How the Boy Might See It* (Pecan Grove Press, 2009) which was a finalist for the 2007 Blue Light Press First Book Award. He has also published a novella, *Monsters and Victims* (Gothic Press, 2010). His poetry appears or is set to appear in numerous periodi-

cals, including *The Sierra Nevada Review, Cold Mountain Review, The Baltimore Review, Ribbons: The Journal of the American Tanka Society, The Tulane Review, Assaracus, The Yale Journal for the Humanities in Medicine*, and others. He holds an MFA in creative writing from Goddard College and a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He teaches at Raritan Valley Community College in New Jersey.

Noel Conneely has had work in *Chelsea, Main Street Rag, Willow Review, Lalitamba, Coe Review*, and other publications in Ireland and the U.S.

Maryann Corbett lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, and works for the Minnesota Legislature. She holds a doctorate in English from the University of Minnesota and is the author of *Breath Control* (David Robert Books, 2012) and *Credo for the Checkout Line in Winter* (Able Muse Press, forthcoming in 2013) as well as two chapbooks. Her work has appeared in many journals in print and online, including *River Styx, Atlanta Review, Measure*, and *The Dark Horse*, as well as a number of anthologies. She is also a past recipient of the Lyric Memorial Award and the Willis Barnstone Translation Prize. She has recent work in *32 Poems* and new work forthcoming in *PN Review* and *Modern Poetry in Translation*.

Jeffery Donaldson teaches in the English department at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. His fifth book of poems, *Slack Action*, will appear with Porcupine's Quill in the fall of 2013.

Anna M. Evans' poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the *Harvard Review, Atlanta Review, Rattle, American Arts Quarterly*, and *32 Poems*. She gained her MFA from Bennington College, and is the Editor of the *Raintown*

Review. Recipient of Fellowships from the MacDowell Artists' Colony and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and winner of the 2012 Rattle Poetry Prize Readers' Choice Award, she currently teaches at West Windsor Art Center and Richard Stockton College of NJ. Her fourth chapbook, *Selected Poems of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore*, is forthcoming from Barefoot Muse Press. Visit her online at www.annamevans.com

Courtney Flerlage received her BA in English from Hollins University, where she served as an editor for the literary magazine *Cargoes*. She has been a finalist and runner up, respectively, for the 2012 Lex Allen Literary Festival Poetry Prize and the Fiction Prize. She has also won Hollins University's Nancy Thorp Poetry Prize for undergraduates and the Nancy Penn Holsenbeck Prize. Her work has been published in Cargoes and The Hollins Critic.

Alice Friman's fifth full-length collection of poetry is *Vinculum*, LSU Press, for which she won the 2012 Georgia Author of the Year Award in Poetry. She is a recipient of a 2012 Pushcart Prize and is included in *The Best American Poetry 2009*. Other books include *Inverted Fire* and *The Book of the Rotten Daughter*, both from BkMk Press, and Zoo (U of Arkansas Press), which won the Sheila Margaret Motton Prize from The New England Poetry Club and the Ezra Pound Poetry Award from Truman State University. She has also published four chapbooks.

Ken Haas lives in San Francisco, where he works in healthcare and sponsors a poetry writing program at UCSF Children's Hospital. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Caesura, Forge, Freshwater, Hawai'i Pacific Review, Natural Bridge, Red Wheelbarrow, Schuylkill Valley Journal Of The Arts, Squaw Valley Review, Stickman Review, Tattoo Highway*, and *Wild Violet*. His work has also been

anthologized in *The Place That Inhabits Us* (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2010) and the *Marin Poetry Center Anthology* (2012).

H. L. Hix's recent books include a "selected poems," *First Fire, Then Birds* (Etruscan Press, 2010), and an essay collection, *Lines of Inquiry* (Etruscan Press, 2011). He lives in the mountain west with his partner, the poet Kate Northrop. His website is www.hlhix.com.

Jackleen Holton's poetry has appeared or is upcoming in *The Alembic, Bayou, The Evansville Review, Pearl, Permafrost, Rattle Schuylkill Valley Journal, Serving House Journal* and the anthology *The Giant Book of Poetry*. Her chapbook *Devil Music* was published by Caernarvon Press. She lives in San Diego and works as an astrologer and life coach as well as a poet-teacher with California Poets in the Schools.

Winner of the 2012 Longleaf Press Chapbook Contest, **Brad Johnson** has published four chapbooks of poetry. His work has also been accepted by *Nimrod, Permafrost, Poet Lore, The South Carolina Review, The Southeast Review, Southern Indiana Review, Willow Springs* and others.

A native of western Nebraska and a former Catholic priest, **Edward Kunzman** is currently working as a financial analyst in Chicago.

Ann Lauinger's book, *Persuasions of Fall* (University of Utah Press, 2004), won the Agha Shahid Ali Prize in Poetry, and her second book, *Against Butterflies*, is forthcoming from Little Red Tree Publishing. She is a member of the literature faculty at Sarah Lawrence College.
How do words assemble themselves? Sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly over time. **Shoshana Levenberg** has spent a lifetime encountering the most interesting people in a

work life that began in the 1960s civil rights movement through hospice nursing at the height of the HIV epidemic. As she neared retirement, the stories insisted on being told; a spigot unjammed and the words have been flowing ever since. She lives in San Francisco with her partner and neurotic poodle.

Wilmer Mills graduated from The McCallie School in 1988, received a B.A. from The University of the South in Sewanee in 1992, and a Masters in Theology from Sewanee in 2005. He published two books of poems: a chapbook, *Right as Rain* (Aralia Press, 1999) and a full-length collection of poems, *Light for the Orphans* (Story Line Press, 2002). *The New Republic, The Hudson Review, The Southern Review, Poetry*, and *The New Criterion* are some of the journals that have published his poems, which have also been anthologized in *Penguin/Longman Anthology of Contemporary American Poets, 2004* and in *The Swallow Anthology of New American Poets, 2009*. He worked as a carpenter, furniture maker, sawmill operator, artisan bread baker, white oak basket weaver, farmer, white water raft guide, and poetry teacher among other things. He was the Nick Barker Writer-in-Residence at Covenant College when he died in 2011 after a short battle with liver cancer.

Molly Minturn's poems have appeared in the *Boston Review, the Indiana Review*, and *Poetry Daily*. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Thorpe Moeckel teaches in the MFA program at Hollins University and lives on a small farm near Buchanan, VA, where he helps his wife and children raise Nubian dairy goats, sheep, poultry, fruits and veggies. His writings have appeared widely. He is the author of three books -- *Odd Botany* (Silverfish Review Press, 2002), *Making a Map of the River* (Iris Press, 2008), and *Venison* (Etruscan Press,

2010).

Steve Myers is the author of the full-length collection Memory's Dog and a chapbook, *Work Study*. He has published in many journals, including *Beloit Poetry Journal, The Gettysburg Review, Poetry East, The Southern Review*, and *Tar River Poetry*, as well as the *Pushcart Prize XXXVI* anthology. He is professor of English at DeSales University in eastern Pennsylvania.

Derek Otsuji teaches English at Honolulu Community College and works at Otsuji Farm, a family-run farmer's market, on the weekends. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review, Crab Orchard Review, The MacGuffin, The Midwest Quarterly, Poet Lore*, and *Green Hills Literary Lantern.*

Joshua Roberts's short fiction has appeared in *Agni* and, most recently, the anthology *Philly Fiction*, as well as *Pindeldyboz, Blue Mesa Review*, and other publications. He works at the Drexel University School of Public Health in Philadelphia.

David Scronce is the author of the chapbook *Letters to Liam* (Red Berry Editions, 2009). He has an M.F.A. from the writing seminars at Bennington College. His work has appeared in *5AM, Confrontation, Hayden's Ferry Review, Rhino, Runes*, and *Spillway*, among other places. New poems have recently appeared, or are forthcoming in, the *Alembic, the GW Review, Pedestal,* and *The Pinch*.

Timothy Steele is the author of several collections of poems, the most recent being *Toward the Winter Solstice*. He has also published two widely discussed books about poetry: *Missing Measures*, an exploration the intellectual and literary background of the advent of modern free verse, and *All the*

Fun's in How You Say a Thing, a practical study and explanation of meter and verse technique.

William Wenthe's third book of poems is *Words Before Dawn* (LSU Press, 2012); his other books are *Not Till We Are Lost* (LSU Press, 2004) and *Birds of Hoboken* (Orchises Press, 1995, reprint 2003). He has received poetry fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Texas Commission on the Arts, and two Pushcart Prizes. His poems have appeared in *Poetry, The Paris Review, The Georgia Review, TriQuarterly, Ninth Letter, The Southern Review, Shenandoah, Open City, Tin House,* and other journals and anthologies. Critical essays on the craft of poetry have appeared in *The Yale Review* and *Kenyon Review*. He received a Ph.D. in English from the University of Virginia; he now teaches creative writing and modern poetry at Texas Tech University.

Gail White is active in the formalist poetry movement, with poems in recent anthologies such as *Villanelles* and *Killer Verse*, from Pocket Poets, and *Sonnets* and *Dramatic Monologues*, from University of Evansville Press. She co-edited the anthology *The Muse Strikes Back* and is the author of 3 books of poetry, the latest being The *Accidental Cynic*. Her new chapbook, *Sonnets in a Hostile World*, is available from Amazon. She lives with her husband and 3 cats in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana.

Anne Whitehouse's poetry collections include *The Surveyor's Hand, Blessings and Curses, Bear in Mind, One Sunday Morning,* and the latest, *The Refrain*, recently published by Dos Madres Press. Her novel, *Fall Love*, is available as a free e-book from Feedbooks and Smashwords. She was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, educated at Harvard and Columbia, and lives in New York City. http://www.annewhitehouse.com.

Contributors:

M.C. Allan
Claire Bateman
Charlie Bondhus
Noel Conneely
Maryann Corbett
Jeffery Donaldson
Anna Evans
Courtney Flerlage
Alice Friman
Ken Haas
H.L. Hix
Jackleen Holton
Frank Jamison
Brad Johnson
Edward Kunzman
Ann Lauinger
Soshana Levenberg
Wilmer Mills
Molly Minturn
Thorpe Moeckel
Timothy Murphy
Steve Myers
Derek Otsuji
Joshua Roberts
David Scronce
Timothy Steele
William Wenthe
Gail White
Anne Whitehouse