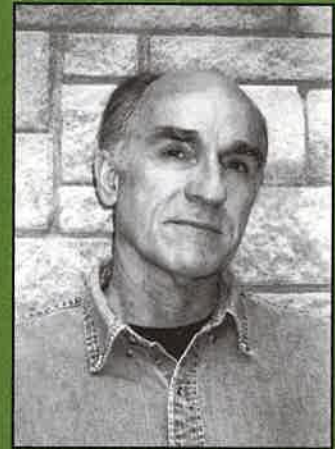


AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

WRITERS' FESTIVAL 2002

MAGAZINE



BAPSI SIDHWA

MARILYN NELSON

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

Agnes Scott College

31st Annual Writers' Festival

April 3-4, 2002

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's Festival are Bapsi Sidhwa, Marilyn Nelson, and Scott Russell Sanders.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the Festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the James T. Kirk and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We wish to thank President Mary Brown Bullock '66, Dean of the College Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margret Trotter for their support.

April, 2002

Editor
Steve Guthrie

Selection Committee

Poetry: Waqas Khwaja and Steve Guthrie
Short Fiction: Willie Tolliver
Personal Essay: Susan Percy
One-Act Play: Dudley Sanders

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Send correspondence to Steve Guthrie, English Department, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA 30030 (404-471-6206; sguthrie@agnesscott.edu).

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Poems by Ashley Akenson

Empire, MI

Heaven is a wild raspberry patch
off the road in northern Michigan
where we ran, sandy and sweat-slick,
into the brambles. I was too hot
and was bruised from a fall off the dunes
and I was sick of you.

The sweetbriars smacked my thighs
leaving behind fine crimson points.
Tangles of branches tripped me,
berries smashing underfoot.

Your fingers were stained red
from the juice and the briar pricks.
You came to me, ripe hands
outstretched, full of fruit and I softened.

I took a raspberry from your hands
and placed it on my tongue.

Venice

I think our lives are like Venice –
 gold doubloons and gothic arches built
 upon mud heaps and garbage piles
 and each half sinking,
 beaten down by the slaloming water –
 a series of canals insulating
 doorstep and balcony,
 keeping rosy wet footsteps
 from their insinuations
 in a hallway or a thumbnail's scratch
 on a banister at bay.

And each day in the wobbly breath
 of morning one of us ventures out,
 stepping into the lacquered boat,
 pretending not to steer its well-honed hull
 shark-like through the waves.
 And the one who is left in bed
 in a cocoon of damask and damaged light
 stretches and lies there
 letting the lapping accrue in her ears,
 listening to the tireless tongues
 of water licking curves
 into the limestone stairs below.
 And she will have to choose
 whether she will hear the sharp thwack
 of canal water against wood,
 the creaking of her house beams,
 or feel the sinuous chill sneaking
 through her slate floor.

The echoes ring up,
 hovering by the wrought iron railing
 and crimson-washed doors
 along with the other's light breath,
 both bobbing with each hiccup of wave.

Vicksburg, 1998

Porter's Chapel and charcoal-coated knuckles,
 clover and cantaloupe rinds,
 weak light through a mint field –
 sweet, pungent, wet with dew
 mottled by dirt and old trash,
 river mud mid-May,
 poker chips falling overboard
 like stars from the river boats;
 scent of silt and hydrangea hanging like gauze,
 salty-skinned kids packed into rust-bitten cars,
 the threading sundown
 shading small faces behind front porches,
 the kudzu-covered stilts of train trestles
 abandoned years ago –
 one red tennis shoe hanging between the railroad ties;
 headlights like spider eyes angling
 through worn-out streets,
 dirt roads with old faces,
 cool and rutted even
 in the long days of hot asphalt,
 and blue dusk and rosebush skies.

Poems by N'namdi Arinze

counter perspective

the night brings mourning women
 burdens have struck them below the waist
 their tears have been a waste
 they were reserved for laughter
 these women have been billed for living
 i am part to blame
 i deferred on a house we decided to build
 if you are ugly i will make you beautiful
 my hands are filled with delights
 that flowers speak of
 i'll put one in your hair, next to your ear
 while we stand under the stars and feel small
 we wouldn't have to stop until morning

remembrance of being

some fear birds or things that can fly
 anything that is holy makes them tremble

my fear is curved by a curiosity of what goes on in the center of storms
 i've heard there's a musician who knows everything about love
 i've been split down the middle
 my mind i've made like a cross to keep balance
 sought after like diamonds limbs are lost over
 today i will avoid clocks and make music a ritual
 i will bath before and after i listen
 i too am a musician
 i only play by ear like i love
 if i close my eyes i will loose balance
 so i watched her in pieces fearing she would disappear
 slowly she broke apart
 i offered to buy her luggage for the feathers she shed
 she preferred old baggage
 her energy grew more inconsistent like summer weather
 and peroid moods
 she only felt beautiful around red flowers
 i could only afford pink
 they made her feel orange inside
 like the sun setting
 foreshadowing another day

a wise man once said,
 "being in love is the best drug
 for days you walk the streets making beautiful everything you touch
 flowers fall from your pockets
 horns play in your shoes
 you feel immortal
 God has passed through you
 and if for a moment you were
 and then for a moment you were
 and then for a moment God was you
 why deny it"?
 i replied,
 "i do not know
 i have never been in love"
 but now i know

untitled

blind people know charter bus smells
 better than i
 but i know them
 because i am moving
 and have been for some time
 we all are
 some faster than others
 we will one day stop
 and feel like we are swimming under water
 with the suns warmth reflecting over head

i sometimes close my eyes
 when listening to music
 and move my head along outlines of shapes i picture
 in my mind
 there may be a revolution in my lifetime
 synchronization is the key
 birds have mastered it
 some black men are like penguins
 forgotten how to fly
 black women come together
 their menstrual cycles along with their minds
 but they realize their limitations
 without sacrificing their dreams
 like Assata Shakur
 see it's all about competition
 which is race
 color just distinguishes the teams
 if it wasn't color
 it would be income
 but since it's all about competition
 the government will cheat
 making movies
 to cover up conspiracies
 in five years
 all anybody remembers is a cartoon or some unrealistic bullshit
 i change the channel and find things like a bankrobber's bag
 easily blending in with those of a homeless man
 if i were ever homeless
 i'd want to be a great homeless chess player
 instead of a homeless man who has gone mad
 wandering was i ever a baby
 or selling dead roses in below freezing weather
 when i think about it
 the only way i'd be homeless is if i were an architect

or maybe something on a list
 of questions i keep in my second dresser drawer
 in which i have no answers to
 next to it sits a bullet i found
 they say bullets don't discriminate
 when Winter came around
 i realized ice doesn't either
 no friction
 none discriminate to cars or feet
 if someone was shot with an ice bullet
 it would melt on impact
 being untraceable

would that be cheating in a revolution?

Poems by Katie Chaple

In the British Library Repository

I am the one in the mask
 because of dust allergies particularly
 sensitive to centuries' old documents,
 and, when I look, I see our reflections
 in the gloss of the table and also see the buds
 of light from the hanging lamps above us.
 We each have a box of old letters from a back room—
 their folds are stiff, and the paper has the weight of cheesecloth.
 I am reading a letter from a shopkeeper in London
 to his business partner. It is the same as countless others.
 Business is good, he says, many customers
 though no new shipments to place just yet.
 Family, fine—Béatrice is to marry soon, a butcher
 who makes a good living. I scribble a few notes—
 though have found nothing.

The other man holds the letters
 to his nose, inhaling deeply.
 One letter after another he lifts and smells,
 making two piles. He doesn't read or even unfold them,
 and my eyes water just to watch.
 He is tracing the plague through England
 by smell—stricken households sprinkled correspondence
 attempting to prevent the spread of the disease.

I turn back to my piles of letters and notes,
 remove my mask, lift the letter from my merchant
 of silks and ribbons, and detect a faint stench.
 I ask, and he says, *Vinegar*.

Saving Eve

Late December, age six, you slipped down an embankment—
 a slope of mud-covered concrete—toward the James River.
 Hanging onto a tree branch, I reached down,
 pulled you back over the lip and onto the frosted grass:
 the front of your pink coat, your tennis shoes,
 slick with mud, twigs and leaves clinging to your hair.
 Holding your hand, I walked you back.

Years later my mother would tell me to write about it
 for a Miss Tempus Fugit questionnaire—
 how I'd been eleven, how it was cold and how you
 would have died had you fallen into the water.
 My mother said we had you twice over—
 thinking back to when you were a baby with meningitis,
 snow falling from the biggest blizzard Atlanta had ever seen,
 and the doctors who'd said you'd be blind or deaf or dead.

So, sometimes when we're having dinner with the family,
 and you're laughing across from me,
 I can think it was a small thing
 that everyone believes I rescued you,
 and that you might not even remember
 on our way from the river that bronzed statue
 of Pocahontas, that innocent savior, her arms out, palms up,
 or, before, how it was I that urged you
 to step out onto that cold, grey lap of water,
 and how I wanted to but was afraid.

Rising: New Dehli, January 2001

On the first and second days they found
 people bleeding and crushed, but alive.
 Then only the dead or dying, none his wife.
 And for a stretch, while he waited
 for her body to surface, just layers of rock,
 a tennis shoe, an alarm clock, a checkbook.
 Then they found a small body still breathing,
 a boy, and the men carrying him yelled for help.
 His face was bloody, and the sudden
 white shock of his eyes opening
 made the men carrying him stop.
 They put a wet rag to his mouth, he suckled.
 The men brought the stretcher across,
 placed the child into the waiting ambulance,
 its insides white and possible.

Six days later, there was no sign of his wife.
 He didn't remember letting go of her.
 Ten stories up, on the roof, the first low tremor had seemed an answer
 to the grasp of their hands, but when the building swayed
 like a pine, they'd dropped to their knees, then plunged
 as the building buckled, its center flying apart,
 folding in on itself.

He remembered that first day, refusing
 to go to the hospital and being placed on a pile of rubble
 across from what had been his apartment building.
 He remembered squinting and blinking—
 everything was shades of grey—and he realized
 that he was seeing the inside of the street,
 everything blank with dust, the interior of the stone,
 the heart, laid bare, clean.

Poems by Scott Hughes

Hecate

The steam carries you from the shower
 You cross the bedroom
 A single bead of water rolls
 from your elbow to fingertip
 then falls

Your hair—separation Your neck—brevity
The curve of your back—failure
Your breasts—life Your breasts—loss

At the window you stop

one hand upon your chest
No words I cannot see your eyes
 The moon floats behind the glass
 I trace over its craters so shallow from here

vast lakes of ice unmoving
grains of dust never turning under winds
craters your breasts your neck
like glass your body the moon
waxing waning

These Places We Sleep

These places we sleep—in rooms with foreign
beds, cocooned in sheets as a changing moth,
feeding off each other, wrapped in linen.
These words we speak, as worn as tattered cloth,
empty as echoes—lift me to your ear
and you'll hear the rushing of phantom tide.
We are nothing more than movements. We fear
The stops—once rest, now only sleep. Outside
Savannah we pull over at a stand,
falling apart yet still selling fruit. *None*
look ripe, you say, turning red plums from hand
to hand. *Keep looking*, I say. *Hunt for one*
as purple as blood. My words sound hollow.
You kiss a plum, tear its meat, and swallow.

Balance

—for my brother, who lived it

Troy steers his Dodge between thick Georgia trees.
Through the purple of morning heavy leaves
watch his progress. He thinks of the give
of the trigger, part of himself flying with the bullet.
He wakes to his high-beams sweeping downward
across rocks far below. His Dodge teeters

on the edge of a cliff, balanced on the chassis.
Hours pass. Troy waits for the tipping over,
his truck giving under him like the trigger,
his Dodge now his bullet, all of him in his bullet,
metal singing death.

Two men appear.

Sitting in the truck's bed they lower
its wheels to ground. As his tires touch earth,
Troy thinks of his rifle, its weight in his hands.

Poems by Charity Livingston

A Picture of Grandma

I.

Mama says

Grandma used to keep a fan belt
to rap her knuckles if she said anything but
"yes, Mama."

Grandma used to let my mama wash her hair once a week
no more 'cause it'll fall out.

And Grandma made her sister's old dresses;
Mama hates blue dresses now.

But mama used to make the pots of coffee Grandma drank (three a day)
and started replacing some of the coffee grounds
with fresh Minnesota black
dirt.

A tablespoon more at a time
and soon mama was preparing fresh pots of
hot brewed mud.

One day Grandma announced that the quality of coffee
had gone *down the proverbial hill.*

It tastes like dirt! She yelled,
and poured her last mug down the sink.

II.

Grandpa says Grandma yelled too much.
She always made him buy two at the store,
One to use and one to save.

She had bad allergies—
her throat clogged up when she ate tomatoes,
her eyes watered when she smelled perfume,
and she coughed like mad
whenever she heard something stupid.

As a result of one or more of these allergies
Grandma quit school in eighth grade—

But she still knew enough math
to calculate

she had collected enough
food and provisions to tend to all of her
immediate family for two years
in case of emergency—

natural, or mor'n likely, governmental disaster.

III.

The only picture I clearly remember of my Grandmother

could not be found in the attic at home.

Maybe I'll find it in my head, clear enough to paint it.
Grandma was on the phone.

She wore a purple dress, with her black Velcro *Roos*,
she leaned against the yellow kitchen wall.

When she saw the camera in Grandpa's hands
her lips tightened, her chin dimpled

and she held up a hand (to cover her crooked mouth).

I know she was giggling,
though Mama and Grandpa say that's not her style.

I've only seen that smirk in one
other picture—

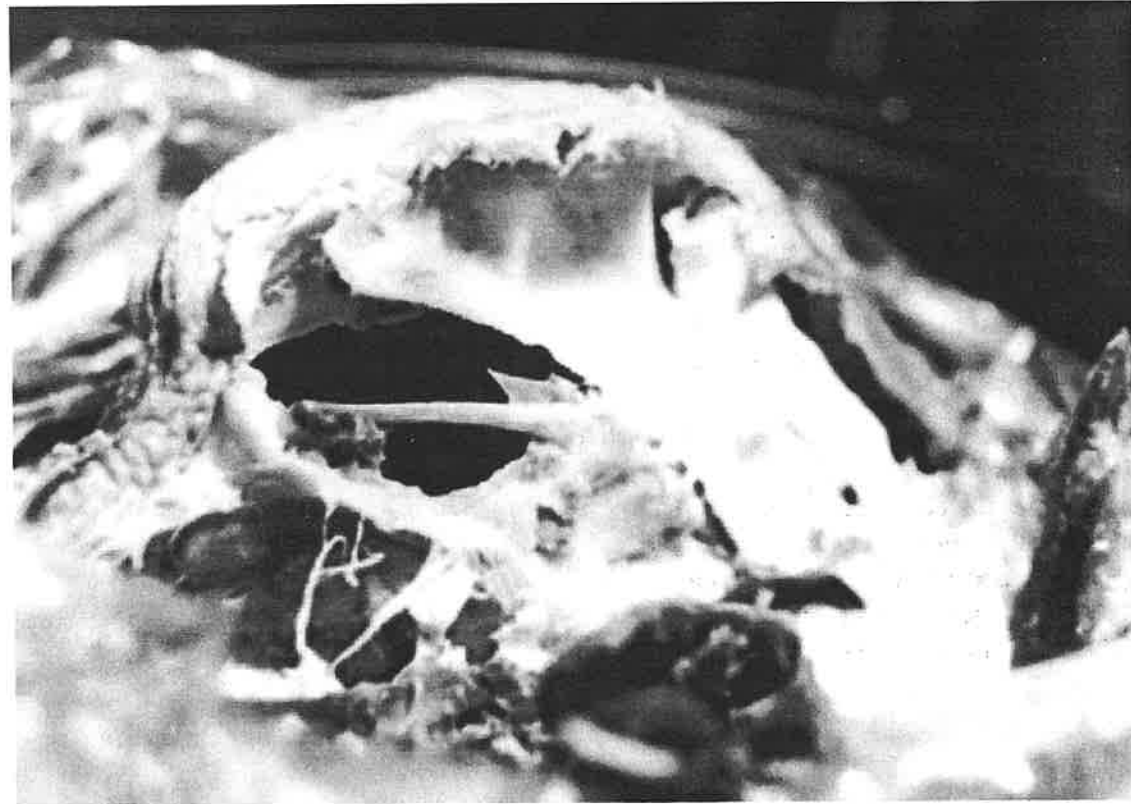
a picture of me walking on a cold gray
February Georgia beach.

My jeans were rolled up and I squished my bare toes
into the sand.

I remember my contorted smile-giggle
as I saw the camera in the hands of my lover,
catching me in a private moment of joy.

I got that smile from a picture of Grandma
and only found it in me once.

Thanksgiving Day



was a family affair.
 Your mother reminded you
 that you are a financial burden
 and your boyfriend said
 that you just don't fit in the way
 he does with them.
 The younger brother's screen print
 T-shirt starts a conversation about
 Japanese animation since the 1980's
 and they look at you
 because they know you will
 have nothing to say.
 They know your mother went to the
 North Carolina Mountains
 to avoid a confrontation
 with you.

You threaten to leave—
 tired of being excluded
 without consent.
 So they play "Sorry,"
 older brother, wife, younger brother
 and your boyfriend,
 four-player game.
 When you go to read poetry—
 something Olds or Dickey
 They talk about you.

And we missed one ritual.
 We forgot to name all
 we are grateful for.

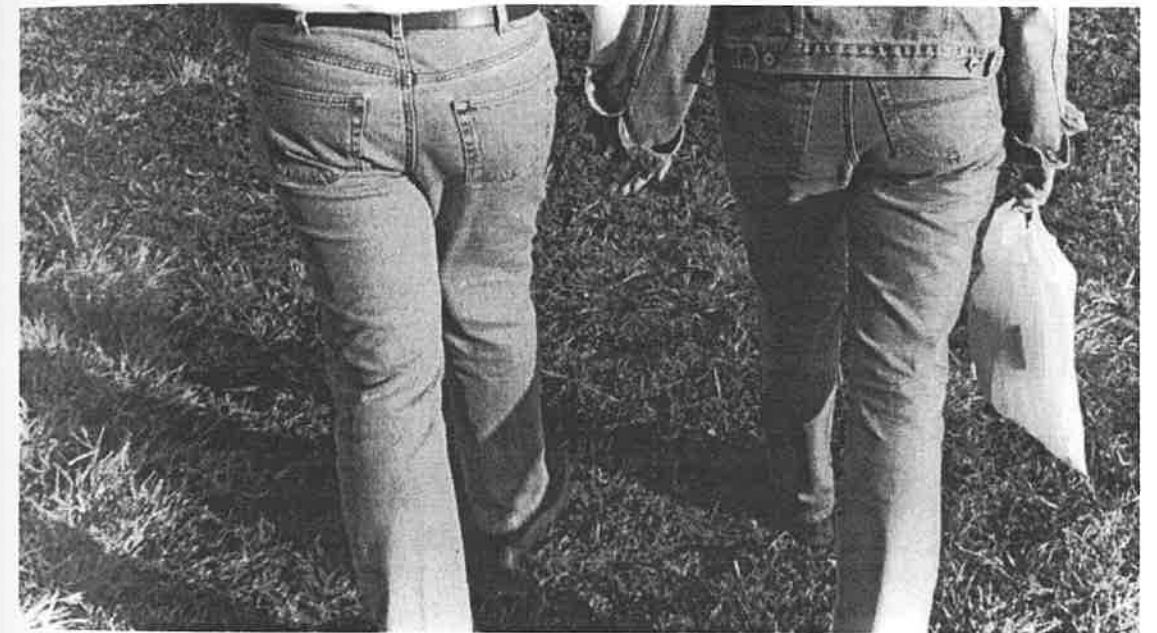
Not Another Love Poem

Excessive bliss dampens the creative spirit.
 I will become repetitive. I will use words

Like "joy" and "adore" and "happy." And I will mean it.
 Love poems are supposed to be written about

Women, tempestuous vixens and muses that we are
 So nothing interesting can be found in the smell of

Your neck. Or the shape of your hands and wrists.
 I should write a poem about a flower



Or a persimmon (because of the sound of the word)
 And if my mind drifts to that poetically perpetual topic

I can't think about the peace I have found
 In the rhythm of your laughter;

Love should be disquieting, a metaphor for suffering
 And the loneliness of sleeping alone

For thirty-two years, until you found me
 (But I'll leave out that last part).

Poems by Pam McGrath

Dear Grandma,

"Kate and Bob are looking at houses to buy."
 I hear you say, "Where is it?"
 "It's really nice, not far from you,
 off Tillymill, near the grade school. You remember, down by the
 old Johnson farm?"
 You say how nice it will be to have them close.
 Then the sound of hard wind and acorns pelting the window wakes me up.
 I'm too hot. The socks that keep my feet warm enough to sleep
 feel tight and hot and confining.
 The covers are heavy and the sheet isn't cool and crisp anymore.
 I can almost hear your voice, calm and soothing.
 I miss your voice. Hundreds of times I have wanted to call you.
 I've even picked up the phone. Or I've thought, this world news will upset Grandma, I'll
 call and check on her.
 You aren't worried are you?
 I used to laugh and tease you about your worrying.
 You'd say, "Well aren't you worried about the girls being out?"
 And I'd laugh and answer, "Why? You're worried, it doesn't make sense for us both to
 worry and you always do it better, with more conviction."
 It was a pompous answer. I'm sorry.
 After I throw off the covers and go to the bathroom, I climb back into the tall bed that was
 your baby brother's. Remember when the girls were small we bought this footstool so they
 could climb in to this bed?
 I try and settle back down and find the warm lingering spot where I was before and recall
 the sound of your voice from the dream.
 I miss your voice. I miss your smell.
 We all sleep in your old nightgowns, Mama, the girls and me. They're worn down soft but
 your smell is gone. I check for it every time I pull the flannel over my head.
 Listening to the rain on the window and the metal pounding of the dripping gutter, I lose
 the sound of your voice.
 God, let me fall back to sleep and hear you. Or let me dream of your smell. What was it?
 Something like warm roses and biscuits.
 The timer on the coffee pot goes off and the liquid starts to drip in time to the rain gutter.
 I might as well get up. You aren't coming back.
 Grandma, I'm worried that Kate and Bob will get married too soon and buy that house. I'm
 worried about Corey driving and Casey being so far from home in school.
 It's hard to worry alone.

Alchemy

Spent every summer wondering if the magic would come.
 Waiting for my turn to sit on the ice cream freezer
 sucking on ice chips mixed with rock salt.
 The men lean back in straight chairs and talk of crops.
 The women, hands never still, shell speckled peas.
 Large bowls of orange and blood-red peel and pits.
 Frogs and crickets call out for mates.
 We cousins run after lightening bugs
 and lie back in the dark damp grass
 peering inside our fists.
 When my turn comes, Granddaddy piles dry newspapers on the churn.
 I sit heavy to hold the bucket still
 and wait for the numbing cold to reach the back of my thighs.
 The crank handle slows and brushes my leg
 as I pray to be the one on top when it gets too hard to turn.
 Last one on top gets the first taste.
 Fighting to keep bare feet on the gray wood porch,
 pushing down with all my strength
 he raises the handle once more around
 slow, we grit our teeth and turn.
 The salt is wiped away,
 the silver canister is eased up and out.
 Thick white bowls piled high with delicate pink
 loose and soft it slides off the spoon easy,
 chunks of peaches frozen and sweet make my tongue and teeth hurt.
 Sitting outside on the steps
 leaning against the screen, grinning up at the stars.
 I hold on to the magic.
 Inside, the only sounds are stainless spoons on glass bowls and sighs
 of completion.

reality

duct tape does not actually stick to ducts
it will stick to the nose piece of glasses
and naugahyde sofas and cat litter boxes

clear nail polish is transparent
but it stops stockings from running
and artificial sterling from turning

porta potties are not moving when in use
on level ground they are quite stationary
and smell like an Avon lady's locker

pop culture isn't really a culture
not like ballet or reggae or Irish
and it won't snap or crackle in milk

a political party never has cake and candles
it does have invitations, gifts and clowns
and hordes noise makers and party favors

Poems by Alexandra Pajak

It Only Takes Twenty Minutes

The summer I worked in a *Drosophila* lab
I learned a thing or two about sex.
Using 100x magnification,
striped abdomens mean females and
solid black abdomens mean males
and if you put one with the other in a vial,
they'll fuck each other in twenty minutes.
Twenty minutes,
The grad student scoffed.
Too bad we evolved from the same prokaryotes,
I watching them
For those blessed twenty minutes
From my lab stool
(the height of which I could never seem to agreeably adjust)
Beneath the flickering, faulty fluorescence of the
Asbestos ceiling
As the flies frolicked
Upon their molasses mattress,
Secure in their vial like a Host in its Tabernacle
I watched them
Blindly and agreeably receiving their promise,
As a Catholic awaits the Eucharist
As the great saints staring from above
With their wax eyes and wooden platforms
Watching, studying every movement,
Recording every step of the consumption
As he steps from his pew to the altar.
I watched them
Complete their task
Without much sighing or heaving,
But definitely willingly, perhaps even blindly,
With the knowledge of their mortality
Whispered within the

GATCTAGGAATTCCTC
CT AGATCCTTAAGGAG

Of their beings,
Exchanging the blessed fruit of their sperm and eggs,
Their flesh and their blood,
Not knowing I was watching.
Or did they?

Candied Apples

I had a mother once who handed me
A paper plate at our periodic
Picnics as a vessel intended to support
My scoop of runny tomato salad.

I had a lover once who read to me
Poetry over fluorescent fast food
As we leaned over processed rainforest
blood. I found little rhythm to his rhymes.

I had an ingrown toenail once who was
Making it too worrisome for walking.
Some people say there is no salvation
For deserting your sandals in the desert.

Wading Through the Fetal Pigs

The biology course for pre-med's.
The weed-out course, they called it
Whose sole purpose in the college catalogue was
To grab the academic scum and sloth of the world
by the neck and toss us into the campus garbage heap,
Doomed to waitress for the rest of our lives.
The fetal pigs arrived via Fed-Ex
one hazy Tuesday afternoon at 2:37pm in
Zip-Lock bags
In between that white popcorn confetti stuff
That prevents breaks and bruises and cracked packages.
My lab partner and I
(stationed at the seventh row of lab tables)
sexed ours
and wrote our names on the white label
with a black magic marker.
The professor asked us not to make the pigs
"talk" by cleverly maneuvering their jaws with our hands
and to refrain from making sound effects with their organs.
Because they were once alive, she said.
Please respect them.
So I resisted the temptation to joke
Or even compare our specimen to my ex-boyfriend.
I stared into its throat as we sliced the skin with a scalpel
From the sides of his mouth up to his ears
So that the incision made
Him grin foolishly up at us
As if unaware, or somehow humored
That the scissors in my hand were positioned
To slit his belly.
I held in my hands the instrument,
Athena and her bow,
Sentence and inflection,
Magician without his wand.

Poems by Amber Prentiss

We Still Eat

I'm hungry today.
 Two days ago, someone's child died.
 I don't know who or where,
 but it always happens. Still happens.
 I want some milk. Milk for strong bones.
 His bones were tubes of potato flakes,
 but I don't like potato flakes,
 and I don't like dead babies or salad.
 I didn't eat him. Someone ate his food.
 I hope it wasn't me.
 I want some cake. I want the babies.

untitled

curtains down,
 I can be illicit again
 with an elephant's head on my bladder
 fleshy thing no name/language
 taking me over

I am naked in the high part
 of a high-rise
 curtains blowing windows open
 fan going over the queen bed.

think unpregnant
 eyes unshutter
 and there it is.

living things should think they are loved.
 I pet the leatherbelly.
 babies are to be read to.
 I read the spanish stallion to the fleshy bit.

husband doesnt like that.

husbands in the kitchen.

Carlos' sinewy ripe Mediterranean flesh glowed in the lamplight and gathered the farmgirl like so much ripened wheat.

my flesh is so much of an old brown tree
 I havent the energy to touch

dont wait for a man to take you away,
 I tell it
 theyre there only to bring hot water bottles and fondle you when you dont want to do it
 yourself.

I am
 a sleepy brown tree
 I sleep.

Mr. G's Triple-X Emporium

GIRLS

GIRLS

GIRLS

all the damn day. the neon one
 scissors her guillotine legs
 she knows i'm here
 her glare on my sheets
 they swing at me all day.
 (once, i dreamt about her,
 smothering that empty pink face.)
don't take me
please. don't.
 plead. out the window.
 she smiles. kicks.

Poems by Y. T. Wong

A Day in the Country Churchyard

The grass is always greener on
 the other side of the road because
 you can't see the cows
 shitting over the horizon.

Cracked, wooden steps lead
 To an abandoned porch where chimes
 Answer the breeze with tinny gulps—
 Hollow shivers like the staccato ricochet
 Of Echo's ravaged, scattered, body.

I run with my tongue wagging
 Run thinking I hear dinner bells
 Carried on the hot breath of the secret-gushing wind,
 Proud of its knowledge,
 It's mouth clanging in loud,
 Overfamiliar tongues.

I shove through a meadow of overgrown weeds,
 Navigate with large strokes and wade through
 Tall cool grasses hiccupping with suppressed giggles
 As they tickle me full-bodied.

No matter how fast I
 Move through the leaning learning stalks of
 Wild tenderness and fecund farm air, overgrown, long-
 Necked, that bee keeps bobbing
 Near my face, occasionally bouncing
 Off my earlobes.

What if the bee flies inside my ear? A sting,
 So profound, would rip into me
 Driven questions.

Under siege,
 I run, I race.
 Breathe. Heave. Pant. Struggle.
 Trot. Tire. Slow. Jog.

Not wanting to hear what the bee says,
 My voice becomes breathless and I drop
 To the ground. Hands

Cupping my ears. Mouth
Shoveling dirt and cursing,
Bucking
In denial.

I do not know how
Long I've been here, but
The bee still knocks on
The knuckles of my fists, a
Mad, possessed, hammering.

Fatigued, I do not give up.
Hungry, I cannot tap the origin
Of those dinner bells. Sleep
Surreptitiously pries open
A crack
Between my fingers.

Into my ear the bee squeezes, flapping
Its fleeting pussy-willow body,
And delivers a honeycomb
For me to bury beneath
The nest of myself.

Animal Reserve

Plotches of spring grasses
Shudder in premature
Warm summer wind like a beach

Of green-tailed flamingoes:
Heads tucked in their wings, their beaks
Filled with muddy water.

Sun-burnt brown paint peels
Off crackling wooden doors. A roof
Ripe with rust from neglect protects

Heaps of autumn leaves. Five crows
Descend; arrange themselves
On a struggling tree.

Shivering in their cool
Clawsteps, the leafless
Branches bounce to stay warm.

In between the interstice
Of bare-barked arms,
The church steeple blinks,

Tries to inflict on the street
Of blinded and shuttered
Windows

Afterlife

**While Soldiers Fought for Peace in Kosovo:
Somewhere in the Carolinas**

She was doing the sun dance
before the storm approached.

That one clue leaves our shoes
covered with the green dirt
of tomato fields ; we wipe them
on Astroturf unwelcome mats.

The volunteers come too late
and they leave too early.
They never search beneath the snake
shed or between the tree and bark.

*I camouflage my skin in
eight feet of sand and water
gurgling mud suspended
distended from my belly*

Here, everything's negotiable.
Enforcement—arbitrary.

You drove over the limit
You dumb foreign bitch

*The midnight calls to the police station
The angry phone threats*

We're out of your jurisdiction

No one answers the sounds pounding
through the ground. Just put
your ear down. Listen.

She deserts her unhatched eggs. Crawls
away with wet dirt caking on her back
in the sun—her new shell. Let
the crocs at 'em.

New life meets her with a pineapple
in its mouth. A grin toothy with orange
peels of laughter, unflossable pulp wedged
between soft persuasive gums.

She crawls through, in between a chew to feel
her way around walls of membranes,
rolls along the bumpy tongue, reaches
toward the throat,

bumps into the tonsils
in the dark, and chutes through the esophagus.
*The heart drums through me feet first The lungs
flap their wings I fall free*

Fiction by A. J. Hill

Fear of Niggers

My father takes us to the barber shop near Hunter and Ashby Streets, and I sit there no less fascinated by the candy-striped cylinder near the door than the life taking place outside the plate-glass window. That window is like a movie screen, and there is plenty going on in the Hunter Street movie I do not understand. The thick tangle of black overhead wires, along which trolley cars find their way from one part of the city to another, fascinates me. As do the women in stiletto heels and short skirts—women with their asses out, as my mother says—flagging down men in cars. People writing down numbers as they leave the liquor store. Men shouting greetings and put-ons to one another across the street, or from as far as half a block away. Like a vaudeville joke. "Hey Leroy, man, who was that ugly looking woman I saw you with the other night?" Leroy turns, recognizes the face, and says, "I don't know, man. She was so ugly I didn't get a good look at her. Mighta been yo' wife." "I ain't got no wife," says the first man, "so I know you wrong about that." They both laugh a locker-room sort of laugh. That's how it opens. Then more heartfelt, "Ain't seen you in a long time, man. How you been?" "Doin' alright, man. You know how it is."

At the same time there's laughing and talking from people hanging around the liquor store parking lot. Music plays from a car radio. A door opens on a restaurant, and different music spills into the street, adding another ring to the unfolding circus. Young men in silk shirts and conked-up hair tied with rags. Rich-looking older men wearing skinny mustaches and razor-sharp clothes. Shark-skin suits with silk color-wheel handkerchiefs peeking from the breast pocket. Scarves, ascots, and other affectations. Leather jackets. Men in snap-brim fedoras, overcoats, expensive pointy-toe shoes called Cadillacs. Some of the men who wear them look quiet but dangerous. They suck toothpicks or smoke cigars. They cut their eyes this way and that. The words *rackets, pimp, gambler* whispered inside the barber shop as they go by.

Stephen and I are boys and everyone around us is a man. Howard Johnson, who runs the barber-shop with his brother, Grady, smokes a cigar. My father smokes his unfiltered Camels. Two men play checkers on a red-and-black board in the corner. Cotton balls of black hair—some the size of marbles, some the size of beads—surround the chairs, as one and then another of the grownups take their turn at being shaved, trimmed, or shaped up.

Mr. Johnson cranks the chair into a reclining position and drapes a warm towel on the man's face. Then he lathers the man's hairline. He pulls out a pearl-handled straight-razor and slaps it back and forth across a leather strap hanging near the chair. He puts two fingers on the man's temple and, with the razor, slowly reshapes the outline of the man's hair around his face from ear to ear, around the back of his neck, and even across his forehead.

Stephen and I do not get shape-ups, but occasionally Mr. Johnson will use his razor to outline the hair around our ears and temples, calling it a "shave." Hot lather and the razor against your skin, the scratching sound that accompanies hair coming off beneath the blade, a sound like fingernails inching across sandpaper. Hot lather and a warm towel on your face, just like the grown men getting a shave.

I love coming to the barbershop with my Dad. I don't know it yet, but this is where we participate in the ancient ritual of the knife, which our forebears knew in Africa. This is what's left of the centuries-old circumcision ceremony. Mr. Johnson, our barber, taking the place of the witch doctor, the shaman, the guide. The other men—elders—watching as we become one of them.

A young man shining shoes stops every once in a while to sweep up the floor and dispose of the hair. The room crackles with life like the sound of chicken hitting a hot skillet—the men laughing and talking freely. It's similar to what I notice near the pool table in our basement. The camaraderie of men free of wives and white folk.

My father, a railroad man, is well-liked here. A railroad job is a good job (for a Negro)—Pullman

porter, dining-car waiter, the Red Caps. So my father has some stature among his peers, and I can feel some of his stature coming through to me. The railroad and the post-office, that's where most of the black men we know go to work. Then there's Lockheed Aerospace. For those who went to college, there's teaching in the Jim Crow schools, or selling real estate and insurance. Not much else a colored man can do—except go out on his own, become a professional entertainer, or an athlete, start a business or start a church. But these are risky. Up one minute, down the next. My father has steady work. He has steady money. He is well liked in the barber shop. Some of the men who come here have known him since he was a boy.

His railroad job takes him to New York, New Orleans, Washington, DC. He gets to see something of the world on his job, has a good wife, two fine boys. His friends call him June Bug. Yes suh, two fine boys you got there, June Bug. Doin' fine. His stature coming through to me. My father well liked, and the room full of men, and the best part is standing up afterwards, the sheet-like bib removed from your chest, the smell of cologne, the barber dusting you with talcum powder, then the handheld whisk broom moving briskly over your shoulders, back, pants—any place a stray hair might fall.

But you have to wait a long time before it's your turn. There are no appointments. My dad just drops in. The glass door swings closed behind him. Hail fellow, well met. And we are in that world for the next few hours. Where the men laugh and talk and sometimes argue about things we do not fully understand. Willie Mays and Jackie Robinson. Sugar Ray and Jake LaMotta. What Tonto really knows. Whether Johnny Weismuller is a better Tarzan than Buster Crabbe. What the Tarzan movies say about the Negro race. Jokes about Cheetah, Tarzan's pet chimpanzee, having more sense than some of the natives. The conversation turning to women, and Mr. Johnson saying, "Watch it now—the boys." And I know this is a signal for something important we are not meant to hear. All this amid the casual crossing and uncrossing of legs. Ankles resting on kneecaps. Then feet planted ceremoniously on the floor, the trouser legs pulled up a bit at the knees, the shoes tapped squarely into place on the floor like some flashy new step by Sammy Davis Jr. A kind of sitting ritual dance. The hunched-over bodies remind me of players in the dugout at a baseball game. The snapping of a shoe-shine rag as the man with the shine box buffs a pair of Johnston-Murphys to a wet-like glaze.

That, my mother says, is how my father got his job on the railroad. Shining shoes downtown, for white folks. One day, instead of rubbing his hand across my father's hair for good luck and tossing him a tip, some white man asked if he'd like a job working on the trains. Later, my father would puzzle over that fateful moment.

What had he done to merit this consideration? Carefully dusted the man's jacket when he left the chair. Helped him with his overcoat. Stood behind him quietly. That was all. But others called it charm, finesse. My father's elegance finding a place for itself in humility.

"You have a nice way about you, young man. You should be working in a better job. I want you to go talk to someone I know." This was how your life was changed. A white man noticed you, opened the door of his world, and rearranged your fate.

Now my father's steady money makes him a homeowner and a man well-liked in the barbershop.

"You see that nigger over there, 'cross the street?" The dark-skinned man sitting in the barber chair talks loud enough for everyone in the shop to hear. He wears black, see-through socks, like a woman's stockings, and expensive casual clothes—knitted wool and suede. Two-tone shoes, squeaking with newness.

"Yeah, what about him?" asks the barber, the man we call Mister Howard.

"That boy's a nigger and gon' be a nigger to the day he die."

"What you mean by that, Reverend?" Mister Howard asks again. The Reverend he's talking to doesn't look like a minister to me. Certainly, he's nothing like the Catholic priests we know. But *reverend* is what everyone calls him.

"Just look at him," the reverend says. "Look at how he walks, how he dressed. Look at that look on his face. His hair ain't even combed. He ain't goin' nowhere and he don't wanna go nowhere. That's why he's a nigger and why he gon' stay a nigger. White man got him right where he want him. Got him likin' where he's at."

"Now Rev, you oughtta be shame to yo'self. You don't even know that man. That man might be comin' from work. He mighta been robbed. Mighta give all his money to his mother or his children. You

can't go round judgin' folks, Reverend. Somebody might be saying the same thing about you." Mister Howard seems calm but a bit irritated too as he says this.

"They can't say the same thing about me. And I don't care how hard you been workin', you can always comb your hair. You can always have a little pride. Hell, pride's the one thing keep you goin' sometimes." Then the reverend ticks off the things that keep him from being a nigger. His house, his car, his investments, his job, his family, the amount of schooling he's had, the church he goes to, the fact that he's here in this barbershop instead of on Auburn Avenue having his hair straightened into a conk with lye.

"Don't matter none, Reverend. They can still call you a nigger."

"They can call me a nigger all they wants, that ain't gon make me one. You see, there's a difference between being a NeGRO and being a nigger. I'm a NeGRO. Just like everybody else in here. That boy out yonder ain't nothin' but a NIGGER and he gon' be a nigger to the day he die."

"Ah come on, Reverend. Why you wanna talk like that for?"

"Cause niggers who we gotta watch out for, son."

"Whachu mean?"

"I tell you what I mean. You got a house? Well think about this. You can make it fireproof, right?"

"Yeah."

"You can make it waterproof, right?"

"Okay."

"You can even make it burglar proof, correct?"

"Yeah."

"But you know the one thing you can't make it?"

"What's that?"

"You can't make it nigger proof."

This cracks the place up. Half a dozen comments fly helter-skelter through the wheezy laughter. Then the reverend takes center stage again.

"I ain't lying. Ya'll know I ain't lyin'. A nigger can break into anything, anywhere, anytime. Pretty soon the niggers gon be breaking in and tearing up around here. Looka those winders at Washington High School. Niggers vandalizing the one place that's trying to do 'em some good. Washington High is a Negro school. Ain't never belonged to white folks. They put it here for us thirty-some-ought years ago. And most of us went there too. Now look at it. That's why they don't fix 'em anymore. Why put in a new winder pane when somebody gon break it soon as you put it in. That's why these rich Negroes, all these doctors and what have you, are moving out to Collier Heights—out there where June Bug got his kids in that Catholic school."

Stephen and I look at each other. He's right about the homes near our school, which is a long bus ride from where we live. Beautiful new homes, lovelier than in our neighborhood. Split level, brick jobs. Long driveways that disappear into attached garages. The houses set way back on wooded lots that make our double-lot home in the Mozley Park area seem small.

"They moving out there so they can get away from these niggers," the reverend says. "They got to move out there. They ain't got nowhere else to go. White man sho ain't gon let 'em come to Buckhead, lessen it's to work as a maid of chauffer."

This brings another big laugh from everyone. My father brings out his silver lighter and fires up another Camel. The checker-player in the corner double-jumps a king. Smoke floats beneath the ceiling like an ominous rain cloud. Everyone is laughing. The Negroes are moving farther and farther away from town to get away from the niggers. It is a joke everyone seems to understand. But I don't see why it's funny. When elementary school is over, I will have to go to school with the niggers—there are no private high schools for Negroes—and I am not looking forward to it.

My mother and father do not want us to be niggers. So they keep things from us. Things that might turn us into niggers, I suppose, if we knew about them. They put a chain-link fence around the yard. We are not permitted to play in the street. They send us to schools run by white nuns and priests. They supervise our every activity. Ask questions about our friends. Permit us to go only to movies approved by the Catholic Church. They sit down with us for dinner. We say grace before and after meals. My father will not let us come to the table in our undershirts—that's what niggers do; we must put on shirts and button them, or we

don't come to the table at all. My mother makes sure we have a hot meal—oatmeal or grits, sometimes a little bacon or eggs to go with it—before going to school. They make us polish our shoes each night before hopping into bed. They stand over us while we do our homework. After homework we get to watch TV together as a family. There is only one TV in the house, and my mother makes the final decision about what we watch.

My mother irons the white shirts and navy-blue slacks that are part of our school uniform. She gives the navy blue blazers with the gold-embroidered school emblem over the pocket to the dry cleaning man who makes pick-ups and deliveries to our front door. Before we go to school, my mother teaches us to read. She uses the *Childcraft* children's encyclopedia, a collection of books called *How and Why*, and an oversized picture dictionary. Having taught seventh grade at Our Lady of Lourdes School before we were born, she knows a secret—it's the same secret the Jesuits know, the one that goes, "Give me your child until he's seven, and I'll give you back a man."

My mother buys flashcards to train us in spelling, multiplication, and division. She brings out the flashcards and drills the material into us before the teacher gets to it in school. She calls us in from the backyard where we are playing baseball or basketball with our friends. "Time to study," she says. "Say excuse me to your friends and come get your lessons." She says it like she's got hot apple pie and ice cream inside. Instead it's those damn flash cards. She wants us always to be ahead of everyone else. She does not want us to fall behind. She does not want us to turn out to be niggers. The hard work of bringing up good Negroes is upon them, and my parents meet that task with sacrifice, industry, a saintly sense of purpose.

On Sunday mornings when the Buick is not working—it works less and less now that my parents are paying tuition for school—my father sometimes takes us by bus to Our Lady of Lourdes Church. The bus travels along Auburn Avenue, and we pass a string of night spots on the way. Young black men in shiny clothes that look expensive at night, cheap by day, are wearing conk rags, leaning against the walls, smoking cigarettes, talking and grinning. Each is in the same pose—one hand holding a cigarette, the other fingering the crotch of his pants. It's more of a flicking motion, like they're trying to scrape something off their dicks without taking off their pants. It is eight o'clock on a Sunday morning, and even though it's broad daylight, they don't seem the least bit ashamed. They act as if dick-flicking is as neutral an activity as brushing lint off a coat sleeve. I look at them through the bus window. I can never figure out what they're doing or why. My father sees me looking. "If I ever see you boys doing something like that, I'll hit you so hard you'll think you been struck by lightning."

I see now that to act like a nigger is a sin against the Negro race. I understand that men who lean against walls and play with their dicks in the morning sun are niggers.

I often wonder why my parents work so hard to make a good life for us. It's because they love us, of course. But also because everything they have learned so far tells them the world is not a friendly place to black folks—that you can't really trust it—and you have to work hard to overcome this universal predisposition against you. You must not only do your best to survive, you must struggle to *improve* and to *become* something *better than a nigger*.

As other black families put money into cars and bigger, newer homes, our parents are putting money into us. We are their investment. We are an extension and reflection of what they are. We are the proof that they are not niggers. Other people will judge them by what we do.

As part of the overall effort to keep us from becoming niggers, my mother has made it her business to wipe out any and all traces of slave behavior in her children. She tutors us to be rigorously polite but not like other Southern blacks. She tells us to say *Yes* but never *Yes ma'am*. Ma'am is too much like slavery. She teaches us never to lower our eyes to a white person. Too much like slavery. "Look them in the eye," she tells us. "They are not better than you." She says to question the truth of anything we hear, especially if it comes from a white person—because the failure to think independently is entirely too much like slavery.

Beyond the lip service I pay to the life of Christ and the example of saints we learn about in Catholicism, it will take years before I am able to see any virtue in humility, or any measure of freedom in the role of servitude that is my father's daily path as a waiter. In the interim, I cultivate a patrician arrogance that will

make it clear I am nobody's slave.

I try to act like Sidney Poitier—create an external persona based on him. Not the free-spirited Sidney of *Lilies of the Field*, but the buttoned-down, holier-than-thou Poitier of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *A Patch of Blue*. When I see *In the Heat of the Night*, it makes me angry to see the dignified police detective treated as a criminal simply because he is black. I retreat to the bathroom mirror where I practice saying, "They call me *Mister Tibbs!*" until I can say it with the same pressure-cooked rage as Poitier.

The education I am receiving in Catholic schools run by white nuns and priests reinforces a haughty attitude that comes a bit too easily to me. *I am learning what white people know*, I tell myself. *So why not be free the way white people are free?*

I trust what my father is trying to do for us. But I don't trust him. I trust middle-class Negroes, but I don't trust niggers.

I trust my mother, but only to a point. She loves us—I'm sure of that—but her emotions are out of control. You never know what she will do. Her secret weapon is the back-handed slap. If she doesn't like what you're saying or doing, her arm swings out backward like on the Three Stooges, and her knuckles hit you across the eyes, nose, and mouth. It is a disrespectful slap. Sometimes you see stars. She slaps you in church or in a store or on the bus. She does it all too often so that other people can see. You never know when it's going to happen. When it does happen you can't do anything about it because this is your mother. And she's doing it out of love. To save your soul from hell and to keep you from becoming a nigger.

My world feels unsafe because it is unpredictable. Especially when it comes to violence. The violence can come from your father, it can come from your mother. It can come from nuns wielding yardsticks, it can come from niggers carrying guns and knives and breaking into the house—something that has never happened but which we fear constantly.

Somewhere, too, in a world I have not met yet, there is violence from white folks. We see them on the news with their firehoses and billy clubs. We hear about the white sheets of the Ku Klux Klan. We know they will lynch you or burn you or blow up your church. But I have not experienced the violence of the white man yet—not directly. What I know of violence—and of racism for that matter—has come mainly from other blacks.

"Ya'll niggers think ya'll somethin', doncha?"

Stephen and I are on our way from the bus stop, knapsack-book bags and blue blazers in tow, school ties pulled down, white collars open. The thugish-looking older kid shouting at us from his bicycle across the street looks like the kind of guy who practices ugly faces in a mirror.

"Why would you say that?" I say, and Stephen elbows me in the ribs. "You don't know how to fight well enough to take on a nigger like that," he mutters behind his teeth. "You get smart with him, I'm the one that has to finish it."

Stephen knows about the law of the street. I don't know how he's learned it, but he has. He knows what tone of voice and what body language will turn into fight. And I don't. All I have is my mouth, and I use it like a Colt 45. I should be scared, but I'm not.

"Yes ya'll do. Go to Catlick school. Have to wear the same clothes all the time. Think ya'll some bad niggers, don't ya?"

"We don't think we're niggers at all," I say. "As for being bad—" Stephen hits me in the ribs again.

But I don't stop. I have my mother in me. The part of her that keeps yapping at my father long past it's safe for her to continue doing so.

The guy on the bike gets a puzzled expression on his face. Like I'm speaking a foreign language. Which in a way is true. I use standard English instead of Black English, but I make an even bigger deal of it when I'm talking to a street thug. Language is shared experience, said Neitsche', and though I have not studied him yet, I feel the truth of it already in my gut. If I talk like this guy, I am saying that my experience of life is the same as his. That I share his values. But he's a nigger, and I want to get as far away from him as I can.

If I were secure and compassionate, I might look for some way to bridge the gap between his experience and mine. But I am a foolish snob, and I want to drive home the differences between us. I want

him to hear the condescension in my words. So instead of trying to decrease the gap between us, I go out of my way to make it larger. This is not wise, but it is what I do.

"We're just doing what our parents want us to do, best way we know how," I say. But there is not kindness in it, no kindness at all.

"Look like sissies to me."

"And who are you exactly?" I slip one hand in my pocket and step forward a little. It's a pose, an affectation. I think I'm Sidney Poitier.

"Oh God." My brother groans under his breath.

The guy on the bike looks me over. "You think I don't know you got a weapon? You can put your hand in your pocket if you want to, but I ain't fooling around with no crazy-ass Catlick niggers carry a weapon."

He rides off. But only because this happens before the time when teenagers routinely carry guns.

Stephen says, "You are the luckiest nigger I have ever seen."

"Whaddyou talkin' about?"

"That guy coulda beat the shit outa both of us. Did you see his neck? Dude was a friggin' bull. Before you go mouthin' off at somebody like that again, take a good look at his neck. If his neck is bigger than your chest, you don't mess with him."

"I wasn't messin' with him. He was messin' with us."

"Yeah, but you were mouthin' off at him. Big dude like that, barely civilized—you don't say any more to a nigger like that than you have to. Dude like that will stomp your ass and keep on walking. I'm not playin'. The only way we'd have a chance against a guy like that is cause there are two of us. And I'm not sure you'd be that much help."

"Get off it."

"The only reason he didn't beat your ass—and mine, is cause he really did think you had a weapon in your pocket."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, fool! He looked at you, saw how you were standin' up to him, looked at how puny you are and figured, 'Ain't no way no scrawny looking nigger like this gon' stand up to me 'lessen he got some kinda weapon on him.' That's why he rode off like that. Better be glad he didn't have a weapon. Better be glad he didn't have any buddies with him. I don't want to get into any fights with these street niggers. It's not like fightin' at school. These niggers don't know when to stop. Some of them have knives."

"You're serious, aren't you? That sucka really thought I had a gun?" I'm thinking maybe I should try this trick again.

"Yeah, well, don't press your luck. Be careful what you say to these fools. Don't let your mouth write a check your body can't cash."

Stephen makes a big joke about this at school and has a good time at my expense retelling the story of what happened. How dumb I am. How dangerous it could have been. What a lucky fool I am. He is so good at re-enacting the tale and making everyone laugh, I forget he's talking about me.

What's not so funny is the sense that our middle-class enclave is not protected from so-called thugs in the underclass who view our neighborhood with resentment and anger. They want to beat us up. It's a way of wiping us out, of saying, "You can't have this because we don't have it." Each day a class war rages on the streets of black America. To protect themselves middle-class black kids who are smarter than I am learn to "code-switch." They pretend that they are the same as kids from the underclass—use the same words, throw rocks at the same windows, imitate the same dipped swagger, wear the same haircuts, show the same contempt for girls, and in as many ways as possible try to say, "Hey, I'm one of you—I'm black, too." Thus, even among the very young—being black becomes synonymous with the behaviors of the underprivileged, the ignorant, the wounded underclass.

Only a fool like myself would think it should be otherwise.

Fiction by Gregg Johnson

Equilibrium

Watching Jill skirt pottery tents, winding through the craft fair past the band packing up a bass and mandolin, past mimes painting the last straggling kids' faces towards the gravel lot where he sat, Patrick knew he should leave his wife. He slumped back in his car as if Jill had put her hand on his chest and pressed him against the hot vinyl. Like a rule he told his sculpture students: Cut shallow on the first pass; point the chisel at the heart of the stone. Do not think, when forty, hung-over on a glowering July afternoon in Atlanta, surrounded by SUVs and hidden cell phones, of dragging Jill Vale into your car.

Over the eleven months of their affair, they had found their balance. He squeezed her hand when she felt guilty over Roger, her husband, an ex-colleague who had recently abandoned a respectable, hide-your-bottles alcoholism in favor of late night binges; she chided his fear of hurting his wife, Carol: a prolonged vacillation. Only lately, he or Jill, or both, had gotten less good at it. He had lost track. Should he ignore her fear of Roger's fate, or was she supposed to kid him out of telling Carol he wanted a divorce?

Jill wasn't much help, refusing to speak, a week ago, when she called him at the studio on campus. "Jill?" Nothing. Even her breath drowned in the hum of florescent bulbs above his head. "Why call if you won't talk?" Her laugh before hanging up kept him awake that night: a laugh he thought he heard alone one night in his basement studio from the marble heads staring down from the shelves, the murmuring, cresting titter of a woman laughing at them both. Now, sitting in his car watching Jill wind towards the parking lot, he had to remember her situation wasn't simple, and she wasn't someone to ignore the consequences of what she did. What little she said about growing up in Savannah was sketchy, but he knew that while she didn't blame herself for her parents' divorce, she thought her marriage hurt her mother, who found nothing to love in Roger when he went with her husband to bars along the beach. Her father's flushed, beery friendship, in the middle of her mother's ongoing unhappiness, had posed some ancient threat of cajoling, drunken husbands aligning themselves against women. Jill couldn't see it was a coincidence that they divorced the year after her marriage.

Think of her warm skin at night. His wife, Carol, from Oregon, said he only proposed because her skin kept the marble pallor of long winters. A ghost, beside Jill, whose grandfather claimed Cherokee blood. At night, Carol snoozing, Jill warming husband Roger, think of last summer, meeting her at museums to neck beside crackled oil landscapes that glistened, he kidded her, like her dark eyes.

He usually regretted seeing her at craft fairs and benefit concerts: Speak five minutes, subjects limited to her magazine and his work. No touching. No slinking off into stairwells, bushes, closets, cloakrooms, ticket booths, gardens, orchestra pits. But pretending to look at tooled leather belts and macramé shawls, he had all day roamed the park, sneaking glances at her tent. She had sat primly in the tent at a folding table, signing up subscriptions to her magazine, a quarterly that reviewed shows at local galleries. Oblivious to him, one long brown leg crossed over her knee and elbows on the table, intertwining her fingers, she looked fragile and at peace, probably because she did not see Roger, gnawing cotton candy, lumber past Patrick through families lugging canvas chairs and coolers. First seeing Jill four years ago at a picnic for new students, watching her make sandwiches in her madras dress and sandals, Patrick had found it hard to believe she had succumbed to Roger, lounging on the grass in white sweats, who now looked worse, only four years older than Patrick, but his beard thinned to patches. Always big, Roger, his steel and bronze sculptures natural products of his thick wrestler's chest and arms, but just a year since he quit the university, gallery receptions and beer had loosened his muscles, nudging a sagging pouch out over his belt, spilling flesh over his collar as pink as the cotton candy he licked off his fingers when he veered into Jill's tent, offering her the cone like a bouquet. Jill glared. Roger, bowing, backed away.

Slogging on through the sprawling park to his car past couples boxing up dulcimers and tie-dyed shirts and pulling center poles from their tents, Patrick had wanted to ask them how Jill could put up with Roger after one glimpse of his sculptures. Heaped, glistening tubes, once, that made you think a huge wind chime had crashed to earth. Later, more profitably, dolphins, bronze tigers for aquariums and zoos. Through

osmosis and heavy marketing, dolphins now winked, tigers smirked outside libraries and hotels all over the state. Driving home one night past a glib Vale tiger guarding a hotel plaza, Patrick felt light off the bronze glint into his car, and imagined Jill beside him, squeezing his arm. He was rescuing her. He should rescue her.

Perched now on the curb just twenty feet away, for all the world a woman unacquainted with guilt, she dangled her straw bag by one strap to dig for keys. Patrick rolled down his window for air, suddenly hoping the sun off his windshield hid him.

Ten feet away Jill's sonar clicked. She gave him the grin that said the world could go to hell, that made him pop open his door. She kneeed it shut.

"It's Roger. Gin, I think. Can you drive us up to the tent?"

Up the hill, out of the car, she led him across the grass. Tents were coming down fast, now, billowing out to collapse beside boxed bottles of dyed sand and copper bracelets. She stopped at a picnic table near a square brick building. "He came to the tent and I sent him up here to the men's room. Just stay with him while I get our car."

Inside the bathroom, Roger Vale, sculptor, charmer of gallery patrons, sat on the concrete floor by the sink, his head on one knee. He had been sick in the sink. The smell of vomit made it hard to breath. Patrick recalled how much happier students had seemed in Roger's advanced workshops learning to wax a mold or spark an acetylene torch, and how hard it was to blame them. No one made a living hacking rock into a face, and watching Patrick work, Roger, the visor on his welding mask lifted, his red beard black with sweat even beneath the cool light from the studio's florescent lamps, had usually kept most of the condescension out of his voice when he passed on commissions for head and throat pieces.

Beside the sink, Roger spat on the floor. "A little party."

Patrick ran water and soaked paper towels. Roger wiped his mouth and dropped the paper towels on the floor. Gripping the sink, he pulled up onto one knee, but the strength left his arm and Patrick had to grab his hand so he wouldn't tumble back against the brick wall.

"God, thanks." He rocked back and sat on the sink, spittle flecking his beard. "Sell anything today?"

"You know I don't set up at these things. Can you make it to the car?"

"Artist? While your wife makes the money."

A fist into his stomach would set him back down against the sink, but he'd have to pull him up again. "Jill was worried someone might see you."

Gin congealed into a thought. "Why bring Jill into this?"

"Because I'm sleeping with her, Roger, though you're too stupid to see it. Because if she'll have me we're running off together." Words he should have said. "Because she's gone for the car," he said.

Roger lurched for the door and wheeled outside. By the time Patrick caught up, he was slumped at the picnic table. Fifty yards away, a woman stacked clay plates into a cardboard box and two boys tossed a softball, ignoring them when Jill pulled her car onto the grass. Once they hauled Roger into the car, he elbowed their hands away, slamming his door.

"Sorry about this," Jill said, leaning on the rear bumper, scraping her car key across her palm as if drawing blood would make her feel better.

"I need to see you, Jill."

Between them cut Roger's voice, a phlegm-drowned bawl. "Jill?"

"Tomorrow," she said. "The motel?" She was looking over his shoulder at the woman boxing plates.

"Jill, you were right. I can't stay with her."

She lay her fingers on his wrist. Assurance and restraint. They were fine as long as they made no mistakes. "You're serious? I mean, yes, but you're serious? This is not some crest you're riding? Let me guess, Carol's still out of town."

Do not tell Jill you're losing your mind, that you've entered some new bipolar phase where the rush of seeing her deflated and dropped you waterlogged into a trough of guilt to crawl through every morning. "I need a week to box up tools."

"Moving anywhere particular?"

"I can't stay in that house. A motel, that leaves." When he put his hands around her waist, she pulled away and clambered for her car, shaking her keys as if to scare away a cat. "The motel," she mouthed, buck-

ling her seat belt, Roger beside her, eyes shut, plump fingers intertwined on his stomach, a Medici prince off to savor an execution.

Backing his car out of the gravel lot, watching his mirror for anyone he *didn't* want to run over, Patrick thought of the ancient gold velour sofa in the room on Fourth Avenue, where he kissed her shoulders, her sharp hips sunk deep in the cushions. The motel bed, where she sat cross-legged by the open window and honeysuckle scent rose from faded marigolds printed on the sheet she lifted over her hair: a lightly hooded saint. Our lady of the honeysuckle. He stayed below the speed limit and slowed tenderly for yellow lights.

Do not think of your wife.

Behind his basement stairs, dragging out cardboard boxes of musty sweaters, corduroy jackets, mildewed Christmas lights, he saw the photo album. Sketches of Carol as Winged Victory, fencing foil slashing air. Polaroids of Carol in her red snowcap lobbing a snowball at the rusting Volkswagen van he owned when they married, Carol in a yellow sweater he had just seen in a cardboard box. Carol, joint in one hand, water spraying from the garden hose in the other, advancing on the camera.

Carol. A florist, now, in Miami all week bargaining with flower importers. For their fifteenth anniversary next April, she wanted to see Carrara, where he had worked at a quarry to support trips to Florence with a sketchbook, limestone dust coating his hair and lungs. Italy would bring them back together. In the brochures she left on their kitchen counter, couples huddled in damp Venice gondolas, strolled the stony carcass of the Coliseum that, he wanted to tell her, reminded him of their marriage.

No need for cruelty. He was only exhausted, two days earlier having finally delivered a bust to a college classmate turned attorney. Glasses of Merlot in a cushy living room wider than Patrick's house, five minutes on investments and children, as if he knew squat about either, a quick fade to how marble had doubled in price. No need to mention half of it ended up powdering his studio floor. Or like the marble heads lining his basement shelves, noseless, hollow-eared suggestions he should have followed his friend into law school. That it was a miracle Carol had hung around this long. Had once hung around. He shoved the album beneath the yellow sweater. She still came home at night. She might as well have stayed at the shop boxing half-frozen roses.

The morgue, Carol called their basement. Gleaming mahogany furniture, shag carpet deep as his treachery had infested the house since her shop took on banquet contracts. Salvaging a frayed Indian rug, the sagging couch he had slept on last night and nights he told Carol he didn't want to wake her, he had faked a shoddy replica of their old living room. On the couch, sipping Lindeman's from last night's bottle, the basement dead without floorboards creaking to tell him where Carol was in the house, he missed his rat. He had always stopped the sound of the rat's clawing by slapping the wall, once throwing a hammer, cracking plaster. Poison untouched in the mornings, traps baited with peanut butter unmolested, he had given up on discouraging the rat's progress. They adjusted to each other, pick against stone, the patient work of the claw. The rat had learned the volume he would tolerate, and fretted patiently at the wall, stopping only last week, victim of a chicken hawk or a neighbor's Tom.

Dead as the corpses, botched attempts at Carol, that hunkered along the walls waiting for bad news, busts gaping from shelves, worried they might be the next to feel the chisel. Evolved somehow from his vision, twenty years earlier, on a jack-hammered cliff above Carrara, filled with obscure urges to consequence, imagining vaguely grandiose figures cut from the white slope. This before he understood the equation formed by the price of marble, his minor gift, and the absence of a Medici patron. An equation that had landed him in his damp basement worrying what to do with inept statues of the woman he was trying to gather his courage to desert. He knew what the statues thought, the most deformed, slack-jawed cretin his moral superior. His mind always on Jill, his every lie to Carol made easy because she trusted him, he could still make the choice any decent man would make. Jill would come to forgive him.

It had begun last summer at a faculty party, when Jill told his fortune with tarot cards. A long life, she said, slapping cards on a corduroy couch. "But a dark time." He saw himself at the bottom of a well, saw owls sweeping silently through moon-speckled branches towards a twitching field mouse. Jill, who had her own share of trouble during her parent's divorce, said if you looked for dark times you found them. And people who listened to fortune-tellers deserved a little darkness in their lives. She had wanted to leave the party then, but Roger insisted on staying. It was another hour before anyone realized she had left by herself.

Patrick still wondered if he had volunteered to drive Roger home just for the opportunity to hear more about his dark future. Roger nodding off, at least, sucking his thumb, knees crammed against the dashboard of Patrick's old Datsun, was better than Roger sober and talking about commissions.

"You're regressing," Patrick told him at a red light.

"Fetal alcohol syndrome." He pressed his head against the passenger window when they turned down his oak-lined street through what had been a good part of town when Patrick was growing up, deserted for decades, but now popular with young couples who found hope in two-story Victorian houses, porch swings, and leaded glass in the front doors. Once out of the car and up the sidewalk, Roger sat on the stoop gaping at the moon. Jill took one glance and gave Patrick such a furious look he muttered he was sorry in a slur that made him sound as sotted as her husband, who got to his feet and slumped inside. Patrick made for his car, but Jill called him back and came down the sidewalk.

Over pajamas she had on what must have been Roger's flannel robe, shoulders sagging to her elbows, the sash brushing her bare toes. "Sorry if I was upset. I should thank you and ask you in for coffee."

It didn't much seem like she was doing either. "You're still at the school?" she asked.

"I like it. No dark time." He had never liked being attracted to this dark woman he looked at too much at campus parties, watching her smile before she shook her head as if she knew a subject they should avoid. He had always kept his distance. A woman who would marry Roger.

"And Carol?"

"The shop takes up most of her time."

"I got the feeling there was something like that."

"You really believe in Tarot cards?"

"They let me say what I think." She thrust her hands into the pockets of the robe and shrugged. "I thought I saw something coming towards you. Swooping."

She said she was looking for Roger the night she came to the campus studio a week later. She watched him rasp corners off a block of marble.

"You really thought Roger would be here?" Seeing her in the studio made him feel he was the one in the wrong place. Dust covered his canvas apron like flour. He tasted limestone on his lips.

"A lot of the time, I'm not sure where Roger is." Looking around at chisels and rasps on the pegboard, the concrete floor, wide steel rafters supporting the roof, she crossed her arms against her stomach as if the studio might collapse. "I think I want to come see you here. What would you say if I wanted that?"

In his mind he saw Roger drunk in his car, Carol at the worktable in her shop, tying kite string around long white boxes. "You shouldn't."

She was at the block, now, her palms pressing each side as if to steady the stone. "I make you nervous?"

He wiped the rasp on his apron. "I'm not sure it's nerves."

"I'm glad you're shaking. It's not like I've done this before." She twisted the rasp out of his hand. "Planning to use this on me? Get rid of the rough edges?"

He pulled her close, but her dark hair, longer than Carol's, her warm skin made him break away. She was right, he was trembling.

"We're like kids," she said. She seemed to be standing far away. "I'll go. I'm so sorry. You just seemed lonely, too."

She kept her arms crossed when he put his arms around her. Rocking her, looking across her shoulder at the stone, he wanted to say how strange he felt holding her in the big studio beneath the long fluorescent bulbs. Then he felt her shoulders against his chest, and she let her arms fall and the warmth of her small body came up to him. The teeth of the rasp raked his back.

He missed the nights before he fell in love with her. While he sandpapered a throat or nose, she flirted with the bust, folding her hands over the eyes, resting her chin on the stone hair. He bolted the studio door and spread a tarp behind shelves stacked with rough stone, his only worry later brushing marble dust off her skirt. But one night after Carol called to say she would be home late, he had driven to Jill's house without any idea what he would do once he got there. Once he got there, he pulled to the curb across the street. Damned foolish. A neighbor might have seen his car and called the police. Roger, whose acetylene torch

flared in the open window of the shed beside their house, might have seen him. She might have seen him and been further convinced he was losing his mind. Equilibrium disturbed. He wanted to jump out of the car and pound on her front door. He sat watching the curtains on her picture window. A shadow passed once as she made her way to another room. Upstairs a light came on. The blind was up, but he could only see a bedpost and dresser until she sat down on the bed. She was in her gown, her back to the window. Her bare arm lifted and the light went out. In Roger's shed, blue flames sputtered from the acetylene torch. Sparks shimmered out the window and died sluggishly in the grass.

In his basement the next night, he ruined a good bust, chipping an eyebrow. Upstairs in the living room, he chucked the mallet at the floor. The new carpet took the blow; the swollen black leather couch, the low mahogany coffee table seemed to hunker together, hoping to avoid notice. Carol came in from the kitchen thumbing through cash register receipts. "What's the matter with you?" She sat on the couch and tossed the receipts on the carpet.

"Nothing good."

She picked up the mallet and slapped it against her palm as if trying to feel how hard he had thrown it. "I wondered when you'd blow up."

"I'm not blowing up, Carol." He should have thrown the mallet through the coffee table.

"The shop's just using me up. I think we should go to Italy next May. Our anniversary? Remember when we met?"

He remembered feeling glad she was away so he could meet Jill.

"I'm always tired--mirrors make me cringe," she said. "Crows' feet. Don't say you don't notice."

He remembered meeting her. Lanky, her long, blonde hair loose, broke, about to take a job arranging flowers, she had laughed when he said she looked like a Botticelli maiden. She popped the mallet against her palm.

"You were happy when we met."

"I don't want a fucking vacation, Carol."

She slid onto the floor and beat the mallet on the carpet. "You're never like this."

She leaned her head against his knee when he sat down on the couch and stroked her hair, astonished he had hurt her so easily. "I'm so sorry, Carol."

Walking past a church downtown the next day, he caught a glimpse of narrow stained glass windows, a man in overalls near the aisle, clenching a dark pew. Patrick wanted for the first time in his life to speak with a minister, but the man in overalls looked like a man in real trouble. Sick children, a wife dead. What could a minister do, confronted with some stranger straggling in with stories of petty lechery, but tell him what he doubtless had told a hundred others? Faith and strength. But despite the light glazing the pews, Patrick didn't think bowing his head there would do much good. You would break down, he thought, break down, go home, and confess to Carol. He wouldn't have the luxury of breaking down, but he would soon have to tell Carol. That was where he would have to be strong.

Carol seemed suited to marble, marble to her skin. But, now, around him on the basement shelves, sat fourteen years' evidence that she resisted capture. (Her pun before they married: "Or do you just want to detain me a few minutes?") When they married, he cut her eyes wide, her chin narrow. More recently, her lips pouted over Jill's nose. Weeks after he finished a bust, sure he had set her in stone, her glance while they cooked dinner or washed dishes told him he had abbreviated the chin or miscalibrated the cheek's plane. Only last year, a month after Jill first came to him at the studio, had he detained the expression he saw when Carol handed him a pot or tossed him a dishtowel, the glance that said what she would never say aloud: "I'm not that easy."

After he threw the mallet, he told himself he'd slept with Jill only out of some sense of conquest after finally getting Carol in stone. Residual blood lust. Loot the city, desecrate the temples. Then the museum called, wanting to see five pieces. He showed them two bad Carols, two homeless men he had photographed near campus, and the good Carol. They liked the good Carol.

Carol thought she liked the idea of people adoring her in a museum. He thought about the rejected sculptures. One peered down its nose from their chest of drawers. Carol draped blouses over it, making him think of honeysuckle Jill, besheeted on the motel bed. Others, galleries sold to strangers who couldn't know the mouth gleaming from their mantels was too petulant, the arched cheekbones on their coffee table Jill's.

"You made me thin," Carol had said, tapping the good one's nose. He sold it to the museum.

Seeing the bust with Jill at the museum, he understood the marble expression: indifference. And edginess, since Carol started her shop, when she posed in front of the sheet hung in their basement, smoking a cigarette, her mind on banquet contracts, unanswered invoices for baby's breath and carnations. She seemed suited to marble, yet seeing her head in the museum, bolted to a pedestal, shook him. Her chin lifted as she rose from making love or let her gown fall off a shoulder so he could sketch, she was ignored by guards, peered at by school children like a caged panda.

"You did it when you were in love with her," Jill said. They had stayed away from the museum for months, but at night, Carol asleep beside him, he imagined her staring out into the dark galleries. It had not been enough to betray Carol—he had decapitated her. Finally, half wanting to revisit the evidence of his crime, half sure he would find a flaw, he had convinced Jill to meet him at the museum on a rainy cold day, a raw wind whipping the windows as he led her to the sculpture room.

From the ceiling hung a new installation: two brass Vale dolphins, snout-to-tail. A woman in red shoes, her back to the bust of Carol, gawked up at the mobile.

"Slit my wrists," Patrick said. Jill kept walking. He found her laughing beside an unframed canvas of orange and blue swashes.

"He says it's us--Roger and me. We're the dolphins. Equilibrium, he calls it."

"You didn't have anything to do with the museum calling me?"

"Cross my heart. I knew they asked Roger, too, but I couldn't bring myself to tell you. Besides, I wanted to see your face."

She was laughing at him as much as at Roger, but he didn't see how he could sleep around on Carol and not be laughed at.

"Don't look so miserable," Jill said. "I'm in this too, you know. You must think I'm crazy. That's what Roger thinks. Without him, I'd be crazy. So he balances me out. Does Carol balance you? If you leave her, will she go crazy, too?"

"We're both a little crazy, now," he said, absorbing the blue and orange paint swathed on with rollers. The thought of leaving Carol made him feel he had pitched into the painting, struggling not to swallow acrylic and turpentine. She dragged him to dry land.

"Balanced," she said. "The blue's small, but bright."

"You don't want more?"

"Not yet. We don't want crazy."

"You'll stay with Roger?"

She peered at the brass plaque beside the painting. "Think about Roger and we're sunk."

"We're already thinking about Roger."

"You're thinking about Carol," she said, shaking her head at the painting, at him. "I want you to understand about Roger, though. I don't want him to end up like Daddy. Lives in an apartment near the beach. Sees movies by himself Sundays."

If she had wanted to desert her husband as soon as she saw his problem, he could have easily left her. "Roger's still young," he said, and at the museum store bought her a necklace strung with polished stones. She wore it, letting him fasten the gold clasp.

"We've made up minds up, then?" she asked, kissing his cheek. "We can just have this right now?"

"Drawing and quartering, that's a form of equilibrium. Equal forces. The Medicis used it. You tie each limb to a horse--four horses, sometimes the head, too. After it was over, somebody had to go find all the pieces."

"I know about drawing and quartering. Just for now, ok? That way you have Carol a little longer. And Roger has me."

"Sometimes they never found the head."

Carol came home from Miami eight hours early, opening the basement door while he was shoveling dust into the bucket he kept behind the stairs. "I'm going to grab a shower and head to the shop. I want to look over receipts."

"You've only been gone a week." Now was the time to sit her down on the stairs and tell her about

Jill. He was saying something else. "You could stay here. I'll bring the TV down and we'll order Chinese. Moo Goo Gai Pan?"

"We used to do that. You missed a work by your favorite sculptor in the hotel lobby."

"Dolphin?"

"A big brass bird." She spread her arms. "A hawk, I think. Branching out, Roger is. Let me think about it. I want a shower, anyway."

Upstairs, Carol, showered and dressed, sat on the bed toweling her hair dry and talking about Italy. "You do still want to go?"

"I said so, didn't I?" On the dresser her bust, draped with her skirt, had spoken to the busts in the basement. The eyes peered down at the carpet, avoiding his glare.

"You look better. Haven't thrown a mallet in months."

"No more mallet throwing. By either of us, ok?"

"Why on earth would I throw a mallet?" He followed her into the bathroom, where she opened the medicine cabinet for a comb. "You know who I think about lately?" she asked, dragging the comb through her hair. "Roger. Throw a mallet at him."

Roger's name hadn't come up since he quit the school. "Why?"

"When you were spending time with him, I worried about you."

His face in the mirror was the face of a man who never lied. "I never really spent time with him."

"You're not going to ask why I worried?" Her comb was caught in her hair. He untangled the knot. "I worried you might get dragged into something like that."

"Dragged?"

"You sympathize with people." She was lifting her hair to dry the strands at the nape of her neck, not paying attention to what she said, her thoughts already moving to the shop. "Empathize. You let people drag you into things. You'd never go as far as he does, though, staying out all night. You wouldn't let me end up like his wife."

Through sliding patio doors, he could see two boys climb to the top of the pool slide and hear them splash into the water while Jill, on the motel bed, pried off her sandals. He had brought vodka and tonic and filled the motel's plastic ice bucket. They were on their third drink. They were on the second floor.

"I shouldn't have asked you to help me at the park," she said. In the room above them, a vacuum cleaner came on. She looked up at the ceiling and the vacuum cleaner clicked off. "I must seem like a lost cause." She had on her loose silk dress, the brown sarong with the sash knotted at her hip, her toenails painted pink. "Is that why you're sitting over there? The mean old sculptor won't point his chisel towards my middle any more? I know—we need to be serious."

He had reached several conclusions. Jill couldn't stay with Roger. What little she admitted meant there was more she kept to herself. "You could have told me."

"You were glad to see him like that. I saw it in your face after we got him in the car. Doesn't seeing him like that justify us?"

"I'm not sure that word ran through my head."

"It ran through mine. I want you to think about what I'm saying, Patrick. Come over here and let me talk to you." She patted the spread and he sat by her hand. "We make him worse," she said. When he took her hand she wrenched it away and pulled a pillow from under the covers, hugging it like a doll. "He's intelligent, Patrick. I don't think he knows, but he must sense something's wrong. Don't think I'm still in love with him. You have more trouble there with Carol." She was crying a little. "And if you ask if it's possible to love two people at once, I swear I'll stuff this pillow down your throat."

He had seen himself on a television monitor behind the front desk. Paying for the room, he had watched pictures flash on the screen. The boys splashing in the pool. A maid pushing an aluminum cart. The drawn, tired face of a man who didn't want his picture taken. Furtive. Like news photos, security shots of men robbing convenience stores. Call this number. He wanted to see his face again to see if he still looked like the men on the news. She put her face down in the pillow to dry her eyes.

"You and I are together, baby, but Roger's still in my life. It's not as if he hits me." When she came back up, her voice was calm. "Just stick with me through this."

She wasn't crying now, but she put her head back down on the pillow. It seemed to him they were waiting here in this motel room for someone to tell them what to do, to find some way for Roger to be better and Carol never to be hurt.

"When you didn't call yesterday," she said, "I thought you might have decided to let it go. I thought you'd break it off. If you want, we could still do that. I can't say I'd blame you. Just do it now, ok? I won't jump off the balcony. Just leave and I'll sit here a minute and cry."

"I don't want to do that."

"You look sick. I want another drink."

"Jill, we have a lot to talk about. We need to be strong now, don't you think? Strong enough to see this through."

"You should look at yourself. You look sick."

In the bathroom, he ran hot water and dowsed the same face he had seen downstairs. When he came out, she was on the concrete porch, looking down at the pool. He made more vodka and tonics and carried them outside. She had climbed up on the stucco balustrade, hugging the pillow still, watching him carry the drinks through the sliding glass doors. "You're on the ledge," he said, and handed her a glass.

"I'm on the ledge. You should come up here." Below the balcony was a sidewalk.

"You should be happy."

"When I think of happy, I think about you and Carol when you were young. Still love her, Patrick? Truth time."

The sun behind her, he couldn't see her face. Below the pillow, a red nimbus edged her sarong, her pink toenails level with his belt. "You need to come down from there, Jill."

"You're supposed to talk me down. I think you talk about other things first, and take my mind off it. Actually, you should come up here. Nice wind. Like a dream."

"What's this about?"

"You'll move into a motel. Like this one? I want to see it. After seeing your face in there, I want to see you in a motel."

"We're happy."

"I told you about happy. I dreamed about you last night. Did you know I dreamed about you?" If she didn't come down soon, there would be helicopters. Negotiating teams. Men breaking down the door.

"I asked you a question."

"I didn't know you dreamed about me."

"I dreamed I was falling. I was in Carrara. I'd followed you and Carol, and we were on a cliff. She pushed me off a big white cliff. Nice Carol pushed me. She is nice?"

"Very nice. A lovely person."

"A lovely person. And she pushed me off, and I was falling. I thought of you catching me. I was falling and falling." She raised her drink, toasting herself falling. "But you couldn't catch me. You were up there watching. You and nice Carol peeping over the ledge. So I woke up. Would you have caught me?"

"I was up on the cliff?"

"Would you have caught me?"

"I would have caught you. Don't I need a megaphone and a net?"

She looked down at the pool. "Nope. I don't see a net in this."

Below, he could see the boys in the pool watching. One had a snorkel in his mouth. He nudged the other boy and they waved. Jill waved. "Hey," she shouted. She let the pillow fall and watched the wind blow it onto a lounge chair by the pool.

"I'll go find a megaphone." He backed to the sliding doors and she turned around.

"You're talking me down. Strong, he says."

"Come down, Jill."

"I was falling and I thought of you. Here I come." Flying, lifting her arms, sloshing vodka onto the concrete, she looked back down at the boys. "Here I come."

Glass shattered on the concrete when she dropped her drink. She was tilting towards him, but he could no more see her than the sky behind her as he lifted his arms.

Fiction by Heather Russel

Watch

Our campus has two custodians: Big Rudy and Little Rudy. They wear the same blue uniforms—with nameplates reading *Gomez* and *Pacheco*—but they don't have much else in common. Big Rudy has greasy black hair and a beer gut, and he talks with a lisp. During my conference time, he used to hide in my room and complain about Mrs. V, the principal. I thought he was hitting on me until I learned he did it to everyone—moved from one teacher's room to another every period, ducking out of chores. Now when he creeps up, we send him packing with his trash bag. Little Rudy, on the other hand, works nonstop. But with his pretty-boy face, he dodges heavy flirtations from our seventh and eighth-grade girls. Rudy just turned nineteen and needs this job, since he's thinking of community college once he's paid off his mother's debts. But he's afraid Mrs. V will hear the girls flirting and think he encourages them, so he rarely speaks to the kids.

As we arrive at school today, Big Rudy accosts the teachers to describe his morning's excitement. He's usually the first one here, and in the 6 a.m. darkness he unlocks doors, disables the alarm, and turns on the front office lights. Then he checks every classroom, turning on heaters in the winter or cooling units in the warm seasons. This early May morning he hit *high cool* on his rounds, hoping the rooms would be bearable at 10:00 despite our south Texas ninety-degree heat. "Morning stuff's therapeutic," Rudy told me once. "Door, light, cooler, next room. No kids to shout, teachers to complain, bosses to assign extra jobs."

But this morning, there was an extra job—a big tan cat stretched out asleep in the yard outside Room 9. The cat faced the science department pond, a bright green pool that was dug, lined, and filled by students last year. Exotic flowers bloom there above layers of lily pads—where turtles, frozen like statues, stare down at orange fish. Nearby, the cat stretched out in a new-moon curve, resting its chin on spotted front legs—a *big cat*, Rudy said, *with a brown-yellow coat, stripey tabby face, black diamond on the forehead*. Its eyes were shut—two black lines above a pinkish-brown nose. From where Rudy stood, he said, the cat seemed to smile. Rudy decided to chase it to the elementary school, where he thought they'd chase it to the cornfields farther away.

"Here, kitty," said Big Rudy. "Wake up, kitty-kitty. Time to go!"

The cat woke with a start and sprang left to the covered walkway, directly in front of Rudy. It snarled like no cat he'd ever heard, revealing fangs as frightening as a wolf's. "Hell, that ain't no kitty," cried Big Rudy, who backed up a step, turned, and ran up the walkway to the office. When he got there, he called Tracy's Country Zoo to say their bobcat had gotten loose, then sent Little Rudy to keep an eye on the thing.

* * *

Tracy McAllen, a middle-aged woman with messy white hair, runs a mom-and-pop store near the trailer park that borders our campus. I've only been to Tracy's once, to buy chips and a banana for a field trip lunch. Tracy didn't smile, even when I approached her dusty counter to pay. At the time, I didn't make the connection between her store and the Country Zoo. Even months later, walking to my car at the end of each school day, I thought little of the braying I heard from there—not so much a *hee-haw* as a *haw-hee*. My third year, the kids told me the braying was from a zeedonk—half zebra, half donkey—in a pen by Tracy's store. The bobcat lived there too, in a chicken-wire cage where visitors tossed it beetles and lunchmeat all day. And last year Tracy added an emu that a farmer had turned loose on the road. The large, frightened bird had hovered in our teachers' parking lot until Joey Velasquez from the Country Gold Bar came to rope it. When our coach went to help, leaving his class in the outdoor bleachers, the kids chanted the chorus of "Boot Scootin' Boogie" until Joey lassoed the bird by the neck and police helped him drag it, pecking and squawking, to Tracy's.

* * *

This morning, the day of Rudy's bobcat encounter, I have special work at Indian Country Elemen-

tary school across the field from our campus, a five-minute hike. Our school shares their cafeteria, where today I'm helping Sylvia Barringer, whose seventh-grade homeroom class has written a puppet-play for their ecology project. It's Tuesday morning and I'm off first period, so I've agreed to run the sound for their rehearsal.

I drag a cart down the covered walkway to Indian Country. It's slow going, the cart loaded with microphones, speakers, stands, a sound mixer, CD/tape player, and box of sound-system cords. I pass our third wing and the pond on my right. Beyond these is a live oak tree, where I find Little Rudy smiling up at the bobcat. Hunched on a sturdy branch four feet above us, the cat returns Rudy's gaze.

"Isn't he cool?" asks Rudy.

"Rudy, have you been here all morning?"

"Yeah, two hours already. I don't mind. I like him. Mrs. V's at Central Office, and I'll finish my work before she's back." Rudy smiles, massaging the back of his neck with one hand. Training its golden eyes on him, the cat grips the branch with wild claws. Its stubby, black-tipped tail pops left and right.

"Shouldn't Mrs. V be here for this? It's kind of an emergency—it would be nice to have a principal around." Though Mrs. V's off campus a lot, I regret this job I've just taken. "And Mrs. Barringer brought her class this way?" I ask, to change the subject.

"No. They went the long way around. But kids passed here all morning, coming from the buses. This cat don't care."

"Who's coming for him?"

"An Animal Control guy," says Rudy. "But he's getting a tranquilizer first. The southside center didn't have one. Meanwhile, a park ranger is coming—that's what the office says." At his hip, Rudy taps the walkie-talkie that picks up our secretary, Mrs. Delarosa. Then he smiles, asking, "Aren't you a cat person?"

"Well, I've never seen a bobcat," I say. I don't understand how Big Rudy mistook this for a domestic cat. The early shadows must have played tricks, to cause such a doubtful error. Now in the midmorning light, the cat is clearly exotic—out of place in a schoolyard tree. A brief wind agitates the whiskery mane curving from its cheeks. The black ears flick, surprisingly tall and slim, each with a large white spot on the back. And the bobcat pants like a dog—which I know to be a sign of fear in cats. *When was it last out of a cage?* I wonder. I worry about our kids—and Rudy standing guard.

* * *

With a distracting view of Rudy and the cat through the cafeteria window, I take half an hour to get the sound system working. I hop onto the three-foot-high main stage to adjust microphone wires, and jump back down to move speakers when feedback shrieks. To make a puppet stage, Team C has pushed two cafeteria tables onto their sides, hazardously close to the main stage edge. Covering the tables and stage front is green butcher paper decorated with construction paper fields, fences, and barns. Above them, blue tissue paper covers the spotlights, and hanging planets and stars complete the set.

I have the sound mixer hooked to the CD/tape player and three mikes—one behind the puppet stage and one on either side. Adam Palacios, our playwright and stage manager, runs back and forth adjusting mikes during the run-through. He's rolled the braid at the nape of his neck into a tiny bun, which means football practice today. Our school is too small to support its own team, and when Adam made the New Hope squad, the coach almost flipped at his hair. It grows straight and black at the top of his head, but is shaved from the temples down, except for the skinny braid reaching down Adam's back. Calling the braid inappropriate—and possibly dangerous in a football game—the coach ordered it cut off, by way of a letter to Mrs. V. She called Adam's father to school to give the news in person. He arrived, a quiet man with an angular face, hollow cheeks, and pointed chin—the spitting image of Adam, down to the braid, which is slightly thicker on the father. On seeing Mr. Palacios's braid, Mrs. V couldn't bring herself to have Adam's cut. She compromised by having Adam roll his into a bun, like a cotton tail at the back of his head. Today he wears jeans and a custom-lettered shirt from the Pearsall Road Flea Market. It reads *Adam Palacios*, the letters spinning out from a black-ink tornado.

Adam claims to know how animals really feel. He certainly has more pets than anyone I know. He brought a python to science during the reptile unit, and a parrot to sing on Cinco de Mayo. He smuggled a

hedgehog into my room last fall, slipping it from his jacket halfway through class, but I made him take it to science for safe-keeping. Adam's shown up with lizards, rats, and a rescued squirrel, and his father keeps four horses on their property. And Sylvia Barringer says Adam goes crazy when strays show up on campus. Once during her class Adam saw the Indian Creek custodians outside, running with nets after three stray dogs. Adam shouted out Sylvia's window—"Go dogs! Cut left and backtrack! Go!"—until she managed to get the window shut.

Thanks to Adam's script, Team C's puppet-play is more about animal rights than ecology. In the play, an alien lands his flying saucer at a rural town on Earth and interviews the locals to decide whether to stay. Arriving at night in a field, the alien finds a bull lamenting its slaughter, scheduled for the next morning. Then the alien talks to a stray dog that hasn't eaten for weeks. Finally, he meets three little pigs hanging by their necks outside a butcher shop. Outraged at such cruelty, the alien flees to his saucer and zooms back into space, vowing never to return.

Despite the dreary theme of the play, Team C worked up props with their usual enthusiasm. Two aluminum popcorn pans, taped at the lids, form the alien's helmeted head, above a body of colorful scrap material. The brown-and-white felt bull has googly plastic eyes. The button-eyed dog, an old gray sock, has a red felt wagging tongue. And to make the pigs, the kids wrapped wet, floured paper over balloons. In a critical scene, the pig-bellies pop open and bacon bits fall out, raining down in macabre showers to the cafeteria floor.

I orchestrate sound from the cart where the mixer sits, near the east-wall windows. Now in the rehearsal, the alien comforts his friend, the doomed bull. "My people would be appalled," the alien exclaims. "Appalled!" I synthesize an echo effect.

"Cut!" shouts Sylvia. "Let's work on these lines."

"That was a *bad echo*, Miss!" Adam calls, pointing at me from behind the left curtain.

"A *bad echo*, Miss," mimics Crystal Ruiz, flipping her curly brown hair. "Dang, Adam, you're such a schoolboy!"

"Crystal!" Sylvia scolds.

"Yeah—shut up, Crystal," says Adam.

"Adam!" Sylvia calls.

"*Shut up, Adam*," Crystal giggles. She wears the dog sock-puppet on her right hand, holding it above her head. "Hey! Bow-wow, Miss Barringer! My puppy-dog eyes are all *chafa*! Can we fix them before the play?" Crystal leaps into a one-handed cartwheel, her puppet grazing the main stage floor. She laughs then, turning the puppet to face her—"Bow wow, Crystal, cut it out! I got no legs!"

"Settle down, everyone—no more cartwheels, Crystal," Sylvia says. "Give me five minutes for a script change, then we'll try the scene again." Sylvia has taught at the Eagle School three of my five years, and she and I work well together. Today her dark hair is pulled back, held loosely by a red cloisonné barrette, and she wears a brown T-shirt dress—typical Sylvia, a petite woman who loves cotton and other wash-and-wear clothes. Using a campus walkie-talkie, she calls the office. "We'll be practicing for thirty more minutes," she says. Then she reaches for a script. "Jessica, Stephanie, Crystal, come work on this with me."

Adam watches from the stage as I tinker with the squelch on microphone 3. "Miss Russel, where'd you learn that sound system?" he asks.

"I bet she picked it up in her garage," says Zeke Leija, Adam's friend who works the curtain during the play. "Your garage, Miss—don't you practice with some ol' '80s band in there?" Zeke laughs wildly and takes a bow, his black shirt clinging to his waist and dark-brown arms.

"Ha, ha, Zeke," I say, rolling my eyes. "No, the district media man taught me what to do. Listen to this!" I start up the space-age music, playing it first in stereo. Then I work the speaker controls, sending music left, then right, through the cafeteria.

"Teach me that echo you did before—*Appalled!*" Adam says. He leaps off the stage with all the spring I'd expect from his athletic frame, then trots over to my side. I turn the microphone volume dials to "0" and cue up the intermission music. Adam grabs for a sound-effects button, but Zeke shouts, "Get away from her—can't you see she's working?" Zeke scratches his head, then pats his curly black hair, slick with gel. He'd be a looker if it weren't for his love-handles and babyfat cheeks, and red-stained fingers from his daily habit—Hot Fries from the vending machine.

If Adam wanted to, he could stand up to Zeke, proclaiming that he's class technician helping keep track of the mikes. Instead he goes to the windows behind me, where his classmates watch the bobcat and Little Rudy less than one hundred yards away. Little Rudy sits Indian-style on the sidewalk a few feet from the tree, and the cat watches him, dangling its left foreleg from the branch. A truck with a Park Ranger decal pulls up next to Rudy as Mrs. Delarosa calls over Sylvia's radio: "Mr. Pacheco?"

"Yes ma'am?" Rudy responds. Feedback squeals above his voice.

"Do you see the ranger yet?"

"Yes, ma'am—he just pulled up."

Some of the kids leave the window to play with Sylvia's walkie-talkie, but some stay at the window to watch. A tall man in a brown uniform steps from the truck, parked just to the right of the tree. He shakes hands with Rudy, then jumps into the back of the truck and opens a box of equipment.

"Mr. Pacheco?" It's Mrs. Delarosa again. "The tranquilizer should be here in fifteen minutes. Tell the ranger to keep the cat treed till then."

"Yes, ma'am, *will do*," says Little Rudy. The bobcat flicks its tail with increased agitation, but doesn't change its position in the tree. It looks from Rudy, standing left of the tree, to the ranger in his truck bed on the right.

"All right!" calls Sylvia, "Let's get back in our places, Team C! Adam, come here—take this radio to Ms. Russel. I don't want it interrupting the play. We have time for one more run-through before going back to class." The kids move to the stage. Adam runs to Sylvia, grabs the radio, brings it to me, and returns to the window. "I want to see what they're doing," he says. "I just gotta bow at the end of the play, anyway." He and I watch the ranger untangle a large net and throw it to the ground.

"You better not miss your cue, Adam," I say, turning the walkie-talkie volume down so only I can hear the dialogue outside. I work the music mixer until the beginning of Scene 3, when the radio squawks, this time with Mrs. V's anxious voice. "Mr. Pacheco, I'm on my way!" I can almost see her rushing down the hall, her walkie-talkie too close to her mouth. "I was at a meeting," she says. "I just heard about—*huff, huff*—the danger."

"It hasn't been a problem, really, ma'am," says Little Rudy.

Calm down, Mrs. V, I think.

"How long has that cat been here?" she asks.

"All morning. I've been here the whole time."

"Well, we can't wait any longer on this!"

"The tranquilizer's coming, ma'am," says Rudy.

I half expect Mrs. V to arrive on the field running, maybe scaring the cat higher into the tree, but she seems collected when she appears. She passes Wing 3 slowly, in a gauzy turquoise dress with yellow cholla cactus flowers. Making her way to Little Rudy, she speaks to him for a moment, then nods at the ranger who kneels in the back of his truck.

"Mrs. V is here," says Adam. "Why did she come? She don't know cats." He pauses, then mumbles, "*How will they get. . . how will they get him down?*"

On stage, the three hanging pigs warn the alien about Jimmy Dean's lowfat sausage. I cut the volume on two mikes as the alien begins a soliloquy on tofu. "You're up soon, Adam," I say, looking past him to the scene outside. A breeze has picked up and Mrs. V's turquoise dress flaps wildly around her legs, her long brown hair whipping left above her shoulders. Now sitting alert on the branch, the cat stares at her. She looks out of place there.

There was a time when I trusted Mrs. V, and admired the way she helped us counsel kids and plan projects. But after five years on this campus, I can't look at her without thinking about ways she's let us down. Like last summer when I worked with Jack Carr, the teacher next door to me, on a unit for the spring. Mrs. V had promised us stipends from a district grant. But when we finished and I approached her about payment, she sighed, "I'm afraid those stipends have fallen through. It's been pointed out that others on staff might complain. They might say they weren't offered the same opportunities as you." She avoided my eyes as she said this, pulling at a loose thread from her sleeve.

"Well, have you asked? Do you know how hard we worked?" I shook my head as Mrs. V refused to respond. When I told Jack we wouldn't be paid, he chuckled sadly as if he'd expected the news. "Oh, I'm

sure she went to bat for us," he said. "I bet one of the higher-ups shot down our proposal. Still, our unit will be great for the kids." Despite his good-natured response, I hadn't forgotten how furious I'd been at Mrs. V, and how I'd sensed that pushing for answers was useless.

"They're gonna shoot!" Adam shouts, his hands against the window.

"No, they're not. Take it easy, Adam," I say, although the ranger now has a rifle aimed at the cat. Big Rudy has joined them outside. *He's brought the tranquilizer*, I conclude.

"It's a tranq—" I say as the bobcat reaches for a lower branch. The ranger fires a soundless shot. I watch the cat curl forward and fall heavily, nine feet down. "A tranquilizer, Adam," I say. The ranger jumps from the truck. Little Rudy helps him zip the cat into a large black bag and lift it onto the truck bed. Then, collecting his net from the ground, the ranger shakes hands with Mrs. V and drives away, to return the cat to Tracy's, I assume. Little Rudy walks toward the cafeteria.

Sylvia stopped the rehearsal when Adam shouted, and now she moves in beside me as Rudy enters the room, goes into the back kitchen, and comes out with a plastic trash bag.

"What happened?" Sylvia asks. "Did they shoot it?"

"Tranquilized," I say. "How fast do tranquilizers work?"

"Miss, I think they shot it," Adam says.

"No, Adam." I shake my head as Sylvia runs to catch Rudy at the door. She corners him and asks,

"Are they taking that cat back to Tracy's?"

"Nah, he's dead," says Rudy. As he speaks he looks at the door, as if wanting to slip away.

"But, Rudy," I interrupt, "we were waiting—"

"Yeah," he says. He projects his voice as if it might otherwise crack. "Mrs. V there got a little nervous when the cat started moving. She thought he might come down or something. She wanted to play it safe, so she had the guy shoot."

"Why couldn't she just wait?" asks Adam. He scowls at the tree and I see him wipe his cheek. He's crying.

"What's the big deal?" asks Zeke from the stage. "Things get killed here all the time." I turn to him in anger, but there isn't any cruelty in his face. He's right—dead animals are common on these neighborhood streets. Often in class, the kids mention pets hit by cars. Some joke about their brothers' late-night sports of gunning cars down unlit roads, scouting the blackness for unexpected movement. *Target practice*. It's hard to read the twisted smiles of the kids who tell these stories. Perhaps they're fascinated by the horror, or feel a nervous grief. But Zeke has none of this in his expression. He seems baffled by our concern.

"It was a life, Zeke," I say.

"A life we took," Sylvia adds. "We didn't have to kill that cat, you know."

Little Rudy shrugs and makes his way to the door. His gesture seems one of helplessness more than indifference. I think he cares more than he's willing to let us know. He sat with that cat all morning, as if his patience could help save it. I know that feeling—I've had it with a number of these kids. *If Mrs. V had been here during this watch, I wonder, would she have waited till the tranquilizer came? If she'd seen Rudy beneath the tree, or known that Adam was at the window, would that have made any difference?* Adam runs to the stage and scoops up animal puppets in his arms. He seems wild with energy and keeps repeating, "I knew it—I can't believe it!"

* * *

"Yup—we really love our animals around here," Crystal Ruiz complains as she enters my room with the rest of Team C after lunch.

"Yeah—whatever!" sneers José Ortega, a short boy who follows her in. Exasperated, Crystal tosses her head, shaking up her dark curls. Her face looks raw, her olive skin rubbed pink beneath her eyes and at her cheeks. I'm not ready to discuss the morning's events with Team C. I'm afraid I'll become tactless, blaming an entire cast of villains: Tracy, who shouldn't cage wild animals; Animal Control, for failing to have supplies; Mrs. V, for jumping out there in that crazy print dress. I look over to see Zeke at my chalkboard, doodling with a piece of green chalk. *PLAY! PLAY! PLAY! THREE DAYS AWAY!!* he writes.

"Your letters look like connect-the-dots," grumbles Crystal. She has both elbows on her desk, and she hunches over, supporting her forehead with both hands.

"They're constellations, *Crys-tal*, for our alien play," says Zeke. Next he sketches a pink and purple spaceship, and he finishes with a stick figure of Sylvia clapping a scene-marker board and shouting *Action!* As Zeke takes his seat, the intercom speaker clicks on. *Good afternoon students. This is Mrs. V with a special school-wide announcement. Please close your books and pay attention, as I have a sensitive matter to discuss.* Mrs. V had gone back to her meeting during lunch, so I'm surprised to hear her voice. A few kids look at me now, as if they sense my anger at her, so I sit down quietly and focus on the speaker near the door. Mrs. V's words are slow and clear, and seem scripted:

Students, I know we've all been concerned about the wild animal on our campus today. Many of you passed Tracy's bobcat on your way to school this morning, so you saw how carefully Mr. Pacheco and the rest of us tried to keep it in the tree.

She's got it wrong, I think. *Rudy watched that cat alone for most of the morning.* I catch myself shaking my head as Mrs. V talks on:

We had some trouble with the bobcat later, when it tried to climb out of the tree. As you know, we are concerned for your safety at this school, and we were dealing with an animal that was only partially tame. Animals like that aren't afraid of people because they see visitors every day from their cages. So out of their cages, they aren't afraid to attack. Because lunchtime was near and we felt you might be in danger, we thought it best to put the cat to sleep. . . .

Mrs. V continues her speech for a number of minutes, but Team C doesn't listen to the rest of it. Adam is on his feet, pointing an accusing finger at the loudspeaker and shouting, "I can't believe you're lying! We all saw you! You didn't just put it to sleep, like with a needle—you shot a gun at it!" His tornado T-shirt is sticky with sweat after lunchtime basketball, and his rabbit-tail bun is fatter, having loosened during the game. The rest of the class is silent, looking either at Adam or me.

"Adam," I say.

"You saw it, Miss! The bobcat was fine until she showed up to make the guy shoot!"

"She doesn't know we watched all morning," I tell him. "She had an early meeting. She didn't know we were in the cafeteria."

"So she's lying to us!" shouts Adam, and for a moment I'm silent. I understand Mrs. V's reasons for softening the language—we *put the cat to sleep*—but I cringe at the license she takes explaining events. In her story, a calm and informed group of adults followed her careful directions. That's not the scene I remember. My story has an impulsive boss botching the plan made in her absence. And like Adam, I disagree that the cat meant to leave the tree—it only moved in response to that bright, waving dress. We could have saved the cat if Mrs. V hadn't gotten in the way. And now, unaware that Sylvia, the kids, and I saw the entire event, Mrs. V expects us to endorse her version. A wave of disgust passes through me, and I'm sure Adam can read it on my face.

"Mrs. V must see things differently," I say.

* * *

Later in the afternoon Sylvia stops me in the teacher's parking lot. Tracy's zeedonk brays a few streets away, and Sylvia shakes her head. "Can you believe Tracy didn't check on that cat today?"

"There's a lot I can't believe about today," I say. "You should have heard Adam shouting at the loudspeaker after lunch. It's irresponsible—the way Mrs. V sums things up without checking for other points of view. She does it all the time, and I'm tired of it. I worry that her speech today will make Adam doubt us—doubt our words. You know, we try so hard to convince these kids they have power."

"Yes, we do."

"And at times I think they believe it. Like when they built that pond right next to these old buildings. A pond with enough life to attract a wild cat."

"They've done a lot with this play, too," she adds. "I think we do influence the kids every day."

"But if they think we let the principal bend the truth, will they keep listening?"

Sylvia sighs, then laughs. "Oh, she's only protecting them. It's just hard when she isn't around. She doesn't always know what's going on."

"Well, I don't know how to fix this with the kids, but I'm not discussing it with her. I haven't even told her about Adam. I can't bear to think of her calling him into the office—to argue about what *really happened*, despite everything he saw."

"Then I won't bring it up either." Sylvia turns to her car. "I'll see you tomorrow, and my lips are sealed." She says this easily, as if we'd agreed to no more than a minor cut in her play.

* * *

It's Friday afternoon, and the play goes off without a single forgotten line. Adam sits beside me in full command of the sound, the only task that seems to console him since Tuesday, when the bobcat was shot. I've privately dreaded that Adam's dad might call Mrs. V, demanding to know why she lied to the kids. But he hasn't.

The performance pleases Mrs. V, who sits in the front row with Central Office officials. She claps enthusiastically at the end, rising to congratulate us. Adam frowns, as he has all week, when Mrs. V has him stand for applause. He holds his chin and eyebrows high, as if trying to look morally superior.

After the audience clears out, Sylvia calls for Team C to return to her room, leaving Little Rudy to tear down the puppet-play set. Adam lingers by the stage, helping Rudy roll the green paper backdrop into a giant scroll. For a moment, Adam looks as if he wants to ask Rudy something, but then he turns without warning and runs to catch up with his class.

Fiction by Michael Watchey

Dogs Don't Cry

Friday afternoon, the day before Tyson's appointment, we made buttermilk chicken and green beans for lunch. I spooned oil into a hot skillet while Tyson dunked a chicken breast in buttermilk and egg, and then rolled it in breadcrumbs. When she was done she put her finger in her mouth, sucking the crumbs off.

"Tyson!"

She froze as if I'd struck her.

"Don't do that," I said. "You'll get salmonella."

Then her face turned bright red and she gave me the meanest, injured look and said, "No you can't!"

"Yes you can," I said. "What do you think food poisoning is?"

"That's stupid. You can't get poison from a chicken."

"Not like actual poison," I said. Reasoning with her was sometimes like reasoning with an eight-year-old. "Didn't you know salmonella comes from raw chicken?" When I saw that she didn't, I sighed and rinsed out the leftover marinade, afraid she might lick the bowl next.

"You think you're smarter than me."

Here we go again, I thought. This was her counter argument to everything. Whenever I knew something she didn't, she accused me of acting superior. Though Tyson never finished high school, I never thought she was stupid. But sometimes her lack of common sense surprised me, and I felt it was my duty to help teach her. "Who cares if I'm smarter," I said. "Just because a person knows something you don't, doesn't make you inferior."

"I'm not inferior," she said. "But the way you say it makes me feel stupid."

"What way?" I said. "How did I say it? Do you think I'm the kind of person who thinks, 'Hey, my girlfriend's an idiot. I think I'll rub it in'? No. I care about you, Tyson. I don't want you to get sick. I can't help it if you get defensive. You make yourself feel stupid."

"Thanks."

"That's not what I meant. Tyson..." But no matter how tactful I was, she always thought I was condescending, which I wasn't. She would never admit I was right because there was something inside her that wouldn't allow it. She was so stubborn and naïve it drove me crazy. She would never concede, even if I showed her the cold hard facts. It was the kind of arrogance that would consume her. It would consume us.

Being six weeks pregnant didn't help things either. When Tyson first told me over the phone, I refused to believe it. She said her nipples hurt, that she threw up before breakfast and later again at work. "That can't be," I told her. "You've got the flu, that's all." But the uncertainty in her voice worried me. She wanted to take a home pregnancy test, but I told her to wait. I had heard that those tests were often inaccurate. Plus we hadn't had unprotected sex after her last period, so it hardly seemed possible. And although we'd fooled around without a condom a few times before then, I'd always pulled out in time.

But the more I thought of her taking that test, the more I worried.

She took the test anyway and called me back. My scalp tingled with electricity. I couldn't believe the results. "I'm going to the doctor's tomorrow," she said. "I need to know for sure."

"It's a mistake," I said. "It's got to be." What were we going to do? My parents were strict Southern Baptists. They had high expectations of their only son. I had one year of college left. I couldn't support Tyson and a child. I'd only known her for four months. "Maybe you didn't follow the instructions carefully."

"Please, Adam... I'm taking off work. I'll call you tomorrow."

Tyson immediately opted for an adoption since being a parent frightened her. Having come from an abusive family, she was afraid of turning out like her father. So adoption seemed like our best bet, though I was afraid of what it would cost and of my parents finding out. Then one night, as we lay in bed, Tyson began to reconsider.

"I want it to have a happy home, but what if the people who adopt it are mean or something? How will we know what happens to it? I don't think I could live not knowing." She turned toward me in bed and I could feel her looking at me in the dark.

"You can't predict that sort of thing," I said, "and you certainly can't prevent it. Besides, the agency does a background check and everything beforehand. The odds are it'll have a better life than we had."

"But what if I fall in love with it and decide to keep it? I don't want children."

"I know. But if we sign the papers, we have to go through with it. And I don't want to wait nine months to make that decision. Whatever we decide, we should do it now, and stick with it."

Tyson shifted in the dark. I knew she was thinking.

We had never discussed abortion as an alternative. In fact the mere thought of it seemed like an immense evil. Yet it lingered in the dark above me, a seemingly simple solution to an increasingly complex problem. I had once told myself that I could never do such a thing, and that I could never forgive those who did. I understood the moral ramifications, but it was as if we were both lying there, waiting for the other to say the word, seeking permission. Logically it wasn't any different than adoption: either way we were getting rid of it. Sure, adoption meant giving it life, but like she said, who knows what kind of life it would have. And what if Tyson changed her mind nine months down the road? I loved her and everything, but I wasn't ready to marry her. And I certainly wasn't about to make a life-changing decision like that because of one little accident. So I said we could have the abortion if she wanted one.

She nodded and put her face on my arm. "Does this make us terrible people?"

"The way I look at it...if we have the abortion we can put all this behind us. The sooner, the better. I'm not going to say what we're about to do is right, but if we're going to make another mistake, we might as well make one that doesn't affect the rest of our lives. I don't know if I can walk around knowing I have a son out there who has nothing to do with me, either."

Tyson obviously wanted the same thing. She moved her face closer to mine and I could see tears of relief under her eyes. "Okay," she said. "Whatever you want."

I put my arm around her and wiped her face. "God can forgive anything," I said.

The appointment was scheduled for the last Saturday in September, and I never felt better. I slept with a clean conscious even though I was about to commit a terrible sin. I knew it was terrible; I had previously condemned people for that sort of thing. But I had come to the conclusion that having a child I didn't want was just as sinful as having an abortion, so I didn't feel as if I had made the wrong choice. I prayed and asked God to forgive me in advance and promised I would never have sex again. Although it didn't seem right to ask forgiveness for something I hadn't done yet, I didn't see why I should wait to pray after the abortion. And there was no turning back now. The decision was made, the date was set—it was as good as done.

Tyson had no misgivings, or none that she spoke of. We slept on opposite ends of the bed and sometimes she stirred in her sleep. We even joked about our dilemma. I said if all else fails, we could always put it in a bag with rocks and throw it in the river. She laughed and said it made her feel better to laugh again.

But when Friday came I sensed something was still wrong with her. We had to find someone to watch the dog. Tyson's parents were out of town, and I didn't want to ask my parents because they would've asked where we were going, and you know how I hate lying to my parents. They always want to know every little detail—it's like every conversation's an interrogation—and whenever they start asking questions I get nervous. My mother has this way about her that makes me think she can see what I'm thinking.

Since Heck wasn't housebroken—we named the dog Heck because she was always getting into trouble with the neighbor's cats, pissing on cars or chewing up the welcome mat—I didn't want to leave her alone in the house. Maybe for a few hours, sure, but we were going to be at the clinic anywhere from four to six hours—it would depend on how many people were there. So I said we could chain her to a tree, and that's when Tyson started acting up. She was afraid Heck would get tangled up in the chain and hurt herself.

"She won't get tangled up," I said. "It's a long chain and she'll have plenty of room to run around."

We were standing in the front yard, and a chilly breeze blew leaves across the shale drive. There were soft white clouds in the sky.

"But what if she tries to run and gets choked to death?"

"She's not going to choke to death."

"But what if she does? What if she keeps pulling and pulling—"

"Tyson! If she starts to choke herself she'll stop. She's not going to keep pulling if it hurts. She's not stupid," I said. "Think!"

But Tyson wouldn't listen to reason. She put her head down and started to whimper like a little girl. You see, you can't argue with someone like that. It made everything difficult.

So I threw my hands up and said, "What if I build her a pen? There's extra wood and wire in the shed. I could build her a big pen—that way she won't run off and we won't have to tie her up. How's that sound?"

But she wouldn't say anything; she just stared at her hiking boots as if she'd stepped in something.

"That way she can't hurt herself," I said. "She'll have the whole pen to herself. Okay?"

You should have seen it: the way she wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and nodded her head, sniffing. Now I know what my parents went through with me every time I refused to get my haircut when I was little and they had to bribe me with candy.

After lunch I went to work on the pen. It took almost an hour to put all the posts in the ground, and then I had to roll out fifty feet of wire fencing and hold it upright with my body while I tried to nail it in. It was a pain in the ass. I didn't even bother asking if Tyson wanted to help because she'd probably find something to whine about.

I couldn't believe that I'd caved. Why did I have to go through all this trouble to please her? Whenever she cried it made me feel like the bad guy. Sure, I bet some idiot had once tied his dog to a tree and the thing strangled itself—I'm sure it's happened—but it was probably scatterbrained, abused as a puppy, neglected, or just plain inbred. Heck wouldn't do that, but you couldn't explain that to Tyson. It was beyond her.

I was so frustrated and in a hurry to get the pen done that I missed the last nail and hit my fingers.

I squeezed them between my knees, they hurt so bad. When I looked down, the tips pulsed and glowed like hot embers.

When I went in the kitchen Tyson was shivering on the sofa with the afghan wrapped around her. She was watching one of those soap operas where all the characters are rich and beautiful and have nothing better to do than sleep with their best friends' lovers and complain about how hard their lives are. She didn't even ask how the pen was going, so I didn't say anything. I went to the sink and turned the faucet on full blast. The water was so cold it turned my fingers blue. After a minute or two, they were so numb and brittle that I could have broken them on the sink like icicles. I could hardly feel anything at all.

"It's cold in here," Tyson said. "I bet it's zero degrees out. Why can't we turn the heat on?"

It must have been fifty, almost sixty degrees outside. All I had on was a shirt and jeans. "Why didn't you light a fire?"

"I tried to but I couldn't get it started. I lit some cardboard but the house got all smoky."

I sat on the hearth and looked in the fireplace. Then I reached in with my good hand and pulled down the iron handle. It made a satisfying clang. "You have to open the flu first."

She looked up like I'd just performed a magic trick. Then she shrugged and tried to play it off. "I couldn't find it."

"If it was a snake," I said, "it would've bit you."

"How am I supposed to know where it is? I don't live here."

"It's pretty common sense."

"That's right," she said. "I forgot. You're the smart one. Why don't *you* start a fire then?"

I held up my middle finger so she could see where I bruised it.

"Excuse me?" Then she saw what I had done, and said, "I'm sar-reee. Did mah po baby hurt himself wit da hammer? Let Mama see."

I sat down on the sofa where she held my hand in her palm and rubbed it like a dog's belly. "It's okay. Mama make it better."

"I didn't see you out there working," I said, angry. "So this is the thanks I get?"

Then she smiled sincerely and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you, honey."

At that point it didn't really hurt anymore, but I wanted to fake it, make it look worse than it really

was—so she would feel bad and maybe think it wasn't all my fault—but when I looked up into those pretty green eyes I didn't have it in me.

I lit a small fire, but it was too much work to keep it going. You had to constantly get up and turn the wood, which hissed and blackened at the ends, to keep it burning. The larger pieces, which I'd brought in from outside, were saturated with rain, and I wanted to save the smaller, dryer stuff for starter wood when it got really cold at night. It was still too warm out to build a fire now anyway. It was late September, and the leaves were still turning. So I let the wood smolder while Tyson slouched on the sofa and complained about the cold. She wanted to turn the heat on, but I reminded her how outrageously expensive the last power bill was, and that money was slim, especially now.

"Why don't we go for a walk," I suggested. "It's nice out. You could use the exercise."

Tyson's eyes were red and puffy. She had trouble sleeping at night, she said, and her tits were sore. I'm sure it wasn't as bad as she made it out to be. I think all of the stress from the last few days had made her ill. But I was beginning to worry that she was hiding something from me. Something she saw in her sleep and was afraid to tell me. I could only guess as to what it might be, but I was afraid to ask. I didn't want us to get sidetracked, not now, not when we were so close.

"Come on," I said. "A nice walk will take your mind off things."

She went upstairs to get dressed, and when she came down she had on a green scarf, a sweatshirt, and a heavy winter coat that made her shoulders slump.

"You won't need a coat," I said.

But she insisted on wearing it, for the baby's sake, she said, as if it mattered. I guess she felt the need to preserve its health as long as she had a right to. A mother's intuition.

"There's a ski mask in the closet, and some gloves, too, if you want them."

Tyson danced up and down and clapped her hands like she had a wonderful idea. "I know! Why don't we stay *inside* and turn the heat on like normal people do?"

"Normal people don't wear six pairs of clothing when it's sixty degrees out," I said. "*Normal people* know don't complain to their boyfriends about how cold they are every five seconds. *Normal people*—"

"Okay, okay, I get the point. Please don't."

"Don't what?" I said. "You started it."

Then she bent over like she was having severe stomach pain.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," she said. "I got a bad cramp."

Suddenly I felt a twinge of hope inside me. "Maybe it's a miscarriage."

"You wish."

"Well, wouldn't that be better than going through all this?"

Then she stood up, the cramp gone. "It's not going to happen, so don't get your hopes up."

"I know, but still," I said, smiling, "I could push you down the steps or something."

I know it sounds insensitive, but we'd joked about it before. But this time Tyson didn't laugh. So I started explaining that I was only kidding, that she should lighten up, that I hadn't said anything that she hadn't found funny before.

Tyson rubbed her temples and let out a heavy sigh. "Let's not argue. Every time we argue I get this pounding headache."

"Who's arguing?" I said. "One minute we're joking around, the next minute you're all pissed off." I tried to restrain myself, but I couldn't. "*You* got a headache?" I said. "*You*?"

When we went outside, Mrs. Lovejoy was raking leaves into neat little piles next door and setting them on fire. The smell of sweet wood smoke drifted through the front yard. I liked having Mrs. Lovejoy for a landlady. She owned our property and the surrounding fourteen acres. She was always nice and easy to get along with, and whenever the rent was overdue or I forgot to put it in the mailbox, she understood. One month I even talked her into letting me pay the rent in weekly installments so I didn't have to scrounge up the money for one lump sum. She was an easy woman to persuade. I waved at her from the front stoop, and she waved back.

Behind the house was a trail that wound through the woods like a river. It used to be a deer trail, years ago, before Mrs. Lovejoy bought the place, before her husband—now passed away—cut away the greenbrier, trimmed the spruce limbs with a chain saw and pulled up roots and stumps until the path was smooth like a runway.

Some of the path was overgrown with wild flowers and branches that I had to break away with my hands. Tyson took timid steps, ducking branches and taking extra care not to trample the flowers as if they were in a garden. A fat squirrel crawled on a limb above us and flapped its tail like a carpet.

Heck ran ahead. She pounced through the underbrush like hunter, and when she came back, her mouth was full.

"What is it?" Tyson asked.

As I pried Heck's mouth open, a chipmunk fell out. When Tyson saw it, she knelt down and scolded the dog.

"How could you? Look what you've done."

Heck put her head down, apologetic, though she couldn't have known what she'd done was wrong. She merely reacted to the tone in Tyson's voice.

"Look what she did, honey," Tyson said, cupping her hands around its little body, as though protecting it from the wind. "She hurt it. Bad Girl!"

Heck flinched when Tyson reached out and hit her hard on the nose.

"Tyson, don't," I said. "It's not her fault. She didn't mean to."

"Yes she did! She's a mean dog. Bad Heck," she said, this time softly, as if speaking to herself.

"She's just a dog, Tyson, she doesn't know any better." But I knew she didn't quite understand me. The chipmunk lay in the grass with its eyes closed, and from the way it breathed, I knew it would die soon. She looked up at me, helplessly, as if I could save it.

"Let's go," I said. "There's nothing you can do. It's dead."

"But it's still breathing."

"It will be," I said. "Now come on."

But Tyson didn't move. She sat there as if waiting for the damn thing to get up and run away. Then she touched it.

"For God's sake don't," I yelled. I'd hunted small game before and knew how to handle wounded animals. You had to be careful. Chipmunks carried rabies and other diseases, not to mention ticks.

Heck tried to nudge the chipmunk with her nose, playfully, but Tyson pushed her away. The poor dog didn't know whether to howl or wag her tail.

"Stop it," I said.

Tyson shook as if she had a fever. "How could she do that?" she kept saying.

"That's what dogs do," I said. I was getting impatient, and I knew a little thing like this could set Tyson off on the wrong foot, so I said, "There's no sense getting mad at her now. What's done is done. Don't beat yourself up over nothing."

"Don't you feel bad?"

"Not really," I said. "I do a little, but—"

Tyson shook her head. She probably thought I was selfish or insensitive for not crying over a damn chipmunk. Sure I felt bad—I didn't like to see animals die for any reason—but I wasn't about to sit around and dwell on it. I suppose the fact that it was still breathing bothered her. It bothered me too. I wanted to go over there and crush its skull with my boot heel—put it out of its misery—but I didn't have the heart to do it. I knew it would not suffer as much as she thought it would. Animals died this way everyday; it was an inevitable process of nature. You can't go through life feeling sorry for everything that dies.

Tyson, however, could never hurt an animal even if she felt it was necessary, and the way she grieved over that chipmunk made me doubt whether she would go through with the abortion. I felt betrayed.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I asked. "Why do you get so emotional when something like this happens? You look absolutely miserable. It's like you want people to pity you. Well I'm tired of it. I'm tired of listening to you groan and moan. It was an accident. Pure and simple. But guess what? Life goes on. Now will you please get off the ground?"

Then she stood up and pointed at Heck. "Stop yelling, you're scaring her," she said. "Look, I think

she's crying."

I looked down at Heck, who was gazing up at me with a crusty streak of rheum below each eye. "Dogs don't cry," I said, trying to remember where I'd read that. "It's a scientific fact. Has something to do with their glands."

And suddenly I remembered a day when we had fought like this and she said that I reminded her of her father—a man who had dominated her entire childhood. But I wasn't that man, the one who brought the belt strap down and broke her spirit.

But Tyson shook her head. "How do you know?" she said. "How do you know dogs don't cry? I bet she's sorry right now. I bet she's crying because she feels bad—"

"Yeah, that's it," I said. "She's probably thinking 'Gee, I wish I wouldn't have killed poor little Chip. He had a whole life of eating nuts before him. If only I'd been more careful.'"

"Why are you so mean to me?" she said.

"I'm not being mean, Goddamnit! I'm being rational. Sorry for thinking. Next time I'll leave my brain at home. When are you going to start listening to me? Animals are dumb, they can't understand language, much less death. So how can she feel sorry for something she can't comprehend?"

"So if I call her name she won't understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course she will. But that's because she's been conditioned that way, not because she knows that's her name. She's been trained to react to certain sounds."

"But she knows when I'm depressed. She always licks my hands to make me feel better."

"Maybe she wants petted," I said. "Maybe your hands smell good, I don't know. Dog don't have the same kind of emotions we do. They do things for different reasons." I was growing tired. I didn't think Tyson would ever see my point of view. She believed in horoscopes and telepathy, stories about twin sisters who can feel each other's pain. But I don't believe in telepathy. You can never tell what people are thinking. You can never truly know their hearts, which is what I'm trying to tell you.

Tyson nodded as if she understood. I knew how hard it must be for her to realize that what she believed was wrong. But that's tough love. One day you discover the world is round and everything changes—the oceans, the sun, even the stars look new. But it's better to learn the truth now than later.

It was getting dark fast, so we headed back. We could see less and less of the path, and it got colder too. The wind blew in short, hard bursts against our faces.

Tyson stumbled up the path. "I'm cold," she mumbled.

"You'll get warmer if you walk faster," I encouraged. But Tyson had long legs, a powerful stride, and I had to jog every few steps to keep up.

At one point it got so cold we started to run. The air was so raw it burned my lungs. Tears streaked my face. When we reached the front yard, I had to stop and put my hands on my knees. "Give me second," I said.

Tyson was holding her side, panting. Sweat trickled down her temple. She turned toward the house, then toward me. "You forgot something."

The face of the house was dark against the sunset, and the front door was wide open. "Who left the door open?"

Tyson waved a hand in front of my face. "You were the last one out, remember?"

I tried to remember shutting the door, but I'd done it so many times I couldn't remember for sure. It's not something you take the effort to remember. But I must have closed it. I wouldn't have forgotten something like that. It was so unlike me. "It was shut when we left," I said.

"It'll be freezing inside," she said. Then she threw her hands up in the air. "And I get yelled at for things like that."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Now I know I locked it. I specifically remember turning the little knob and checking to see that the mat wasn't in the way when I pulled it shut."

She shook her head. "Well you didn't shut it tight enough."

Then it became clear to me. "I think there's someone in there," I said.

"God, whatever! Just admit it! *You* were the last one out and *you* forgot to shut the door. Case closed. Can't you see that?"

But I really thought someone had broken in while we were gone, and perhaps he was still there, wait-

ing in the dark. Tyson looked at me like she knew what I wanted to say. Her eyes dared me to say it. She wanted to prove me wrong, for spite, and I knew that whatever I said she'd think I was lying, trying to cover my ass.

"Just listen to me for one second. I'm being completely serious—" But her face went slack, her eyes dimmed and lost all recognition. She turned away and walked toward the house. It was dark inside, darker than anything I ever knew. The door gaped like a dark socket in a huge skull. Then the wind blew against the house and the door moved. Or was someone there, hiding behind it? I followed her through the yard, then up the front steps, and onto the stoop.

Tyson's hands hung heavily at her sides, like blocks of ice. So I began to rub them. But no matter how hard I rubbed, I couldn't seem to warm them. Finally I relented. "All right," I said.

Inside the house I quickly turned on the central heating and listened for the rumble of the fan. It would take a while for it to kick on, and then a little longer before the house would begin to warm. I set the thermostat for seventy and listened. The house was quiet, the windows frosted, and the sunset a deep orange glow in the picture window.

Tyson sat down on the couch. A loose strand of hair dangled down her cheek. One hand lay above her stomach, while the other lay open on her thigh as if she'd dropped something she didn't care to pick up.

"What's wrong?" I said. "Tyson, what's wrong?"

But she wouldn't answer me, and that's when it occurred to me. That's when I knew she would leave me. It was inevitable. She had made up her mind and there was no convincing her.

"Please, Tyson... What's wrong?" I massaged her neck and shoulders. "It'll get warm soon," I said. "Just a little longer. You'll see. It'll be nice and cozy. We'll leave the heat on all night if you want. You can have all the blankets." I pulled an afghan around her and rubbed her hands again. "Tyson?" My lips were chapped. My fingers ached. I couldn't stop shaking. Then her hands surprised me. They seemed so cold and white, yet when I put them to my trembling face I could feel the heat run through them.

Nonfiction by Laynea Allen

Breathing Under Water

Along the Ocoee River winds a two lane road. There are no "no trucks" signs despite the fact two semis could not fit side by side without serious difficulty. The most serious being the fifty foot drop down to the rocky riverbed. Strangely enough, no car ever seems to fall over the guardrails down to the water. Around each curve the guardrails snake, like a fence made of titanium. Unbreakable. Unmovable. Unmarred. Not even a smudge from a veering black Honda. Or a tan streak from a waddling RV. No orange-yellow lines from the school busses full of rafters that make the same trek hourly. Daily. For the summer season. When the busses are loosed, it's a free for all. But that's not how it used to be.

Before the Tennessee Valley Authority money crisis. Before they decided to make money off the rafters. Before they hiked the water rate several times higher than the normal rates for Tennesseans. Before the Olympics rained down upon sleepy Polk County, Tennessee. Before I went to college. Before my grandparents moved from the mountains. Before I started elementary school, I used to take the trip up that road. Without the RVs. Without the school busses and fancy created kayak rapids. Without all the cars. To my grandparents house.

It was when the trees still hid the river. My only memories of the ride up, whoever I rode up with, was my looking for the river through the trees and the inevitable car-sickness that followed. We made many stops along that road. All out of necessity, never scenery. But when I was allowed to get out of the car to cool down, or was able to actually see the water down below, I always wanted to touch it. To take my inflatable doughnut and ride down the cascading dam. To crash into the pool below and cruise along the shallow stream occasionally bumping into rocks. To see the trail of a water moccasin curl through the water and hide in dammed up brush. To watch the cars up above race by me, while they did not see me.

~*~

They had an open well in their front yard. My grampa had built the well house around the spring, but left it to run as it had run continuously for only the earth knows how long. Inside the well house it was always damp and cold and that's where they kept the canned tomatoes. Outside the cinder blocks were painted white and a stainless steel dipper with a wooden handle hung from a single nail. I would go with Nanaw to the well house just to use the dipper. It felt like drinking from a cereal bowl with a handle, always bordering on a wet mess. The spring pooled in front of the well house steps.

The water was crystal. Smooth, clear, and cold. We never went there without drinking from it. Without dipping into nature and tasting its beauty. She would get the dipper and rinse it in the pool, then fill it and drink from it. Smacking her lips afterwards and always throwing the left over water into the grass. Every drink should be a new one, a fresh one, she thought. She'd dip it into the pool again and try to hold it as I sipped. It would spill on me and I'd say "enough" and wipe my mouth on my forearm. She'd throw the remaining water into the grass and rehang the dipper. That dipper, the same one, hung there for years, and after moving, hung from a single nail above the kitchen sink, where they'd drink from the faucet, never getting a glass from the cupboard.

From the pool ran a stream that ran into a bigger stream that flowed parallel to the house. The driveway crossed over it and it was just deep enough for me to believe there was a fish in it. Sometimes I thought I saw one jump up from across the yard. Or saw its trail as it swam downstream. I would build a dam with rocks and sticks and walk down as far as I could away from it and start running through the stream trying to scare the fish. My plan would always be to chase it into the concrete tube under the road and block it in with some big rocks, my dam being on the other side. Then I'd run around and catch it. I was so sure the fish was there that even bought a net. So many times I thought I saw the fish, thought I saw it swimming scared up the stream as I clamored behind it. But then there'd be nothing. And I don't know if it ever was there or if I just wanted it to be there. Wanted to have a reason to play in the water.

~*~

I remember the rides back home in my grampa's black pickup truck. It had two tone yellow stripes down the sides and yellow wheels to match. The same truck he would, a few years later, decapitate by running it under a semi's trailer while drunk and claim he knew enough to lay down in the seat despite a case of beer. It was his twisted badge of honor. He thought he was a smart drunk. We thought differently. We thought he was lucky. I never considered how lucky I was traveling down that winding road so many times in that very truck, not knowing, not aware of the dangers of the silver cans he sat between his legs when we passed cops. I was only four. He should have known.

Nanaw always made sure we had a half gallon of water with us whenever we traveled. She was always concerned with thirst. At night, even when I'd forget, or even if I wouldn't request it, she'd bring a bottle of cold water to put on my night stand in case I got thirsty. That was back when Coke still came in glass bottles. My grampa called them Dopes. She saved them for water bottles, filling the bottom row of her refrigerator with them. Never fail, I would wake up, whether in the middle of the night or in the morning, and a water bottle would always be there. She better be thankful I wasn't a bed wetter.

She saved everything. There were gallons of water under the sink in case of a catastrophe. Tornado. Drought. Snow storm. Rust in the water. A gallon was always in the refrigerator, next to the whole milk, buttermilk, and orange juice. On trips she'd freeze a half gallon so we'd have cold water the whole trip. It was two hours from their house to mine. Not really long enough to cause much thirst. The most important water wasn't the frozen water we brought with us but the water we used to fill the other half gallon.

There was an area in the road where a large broad curve hugged the mountain, allowing enough room for a pull off area on the shoulder. There was the spring. It flowed out of the rocks and years ago someone had been smart enough to drill a hole in the rock and place a small PVC pipe to channel the water. My grampa would always stop to see if it was running. He hated any water but mountain water. City water was tepid and tasted of chemicals. It had no flavors of the earth. It was plastic, just like the new Coke bottles.

Sometimes the spring was a trickle, but most of the time it was a stream. Like a water fountain with the coldest, cleanest, freshest water. He would lap at the water, savoring the coldness as it went from his lips into and through his body. I would imitate him, closing my eyes, opening my mouth wide as I could, and walking directly into the falling stream. Of course I would get soaked. I would be shivering but all I would say is, "that's good water." My shirt streaked and clung to my cold body. Nanaw would bring the empty half gallon jug and my grampa would fill it with the spring water. She would take off my wet shirt, kiss my forehead, and tell me to get into the sun to warm up. I'd stand at the edge of the shade, waiting for my grampa to fill the jug so I could ask for a drink. The first drink.

~*~

I was the first grandchild. I am the only one who drank from the well and the spring. I am the only one who chased the fish. Who saw the fish. But as long as there's water enough to drink there will always be fish, and kisses, and water bottles beside the bed in the morning. But there will never be the fresh spring water, it's long dried up. We will settle for the faucet, pouring forth water from the well, from the earth, lapping at it until we are drenched.

Nonfiction by Kate Heidbrink

Lotus

An inspector from Child Protective Services came to visit me one fourth grade morning. The visit formed the aftershock to the previous day, when my mother and I had visited the gynecologist's to examine a small white discharge, unbeknownst to me the routine preceding to an extended early adolescence. The next bluelit day I remember my mom calling me downstairs to see the inspector, a small pudgy woman with warm eyes and blonde hair who asked if she could speak to me alone upstairs. I looked at my mom, and when she gave permission, I nodded. The lady followed me upstairs, and we sat cross-legged on the white carpet, facing each other.

She asked me questions, her young voice friendly, her eyes on my scrappy 9-year-old body. No doubt she saw the watching blue eyes, the roller-skating bruises present on my pale legs, her ears centered on my cheerful answers. Did I like my parents? Oh yes, very much. And what did they do? Well, my mom ran errands with my baby brother, and my dad was a physicist at UCI. Sometimes Mom would take us to his office and we'd draw on the chalkboard with his colored chalks: *Dad - I love you*. And down in the Lab with the scary noises he'd give us rides on the crane if we held on tight.

The woman nodded. And what did my family do for fun?

And she listened to me chatter on and on: church on Sundays, backpacking with the seasons, pool each summer noon, beach evenings—it was less crowded then, and my parents had skin cancer.

That's too bad, she told me, and I liked her even more.

But I liked it better than, too, I told her, not yet having enough words to explain my outgoing introversion. Because there were fewer people, and the water felt warmer.

You have asthma? she asked, checking her sheet.

Yeah, and when I was little I liked the hospital pancakes best, so when I got back, Mom would make buttermilk pancakes from a mix so I'd want to come home.

She smiled kindly, listening to me babble on, this time about roughhousing with my dad. Only we had to stop if somebody got hurt. And usually it was Tess, 'cause she was the smallest, unless Luke joined in, of course. Then my mom would say, Oh, Bill.

She paused then. "Has anyone ever touched you in a way you didn't like?" she asked.

I expected, somehow, this echo from the cold forceps of the gynecology office, but the shock still sent me sprawling. I'm 9 years old! I explained to her, as though it were self-evident.

And this woman accepted my answer, posing for me the next question: "Do your parents ever spank you?"

At the back of my mind lay the idea that this was a test, somehow, for the sort of evil present only, I believed, in the stacks of children's nonfiction I carted away from Heritage Park: *Global Warming, Alcohol Abuse, Pollution, Let's Talk About Drug Abuse, Famous Women, The Environment*, slim books potent enough to poison portions of my underlying optimism. And I had rifled through enough of my mom's parenting books to know that spanking was *bad* in the secular vision. But I had nothing to hide, so I responded as effusively as I had to the beach questions, and with only a hint more caution.

"Sure," I said cheerfully. "Sometimes, when we're really bad, my mom will tell us Dad's going to spank us later, and when he gets home, he has to sit us down in the living room and spank us." I didn't add that I avoided spanking to avoid the disappointed look on my dad's face; that awareness belonged to another decade.

"Does your dad spank you on your bare bottom?" the lady asked.

I felt indignant at this invasion of privacy, but I responded casually. "He pulls our pants down and swats us twice."

The lady nodded, gathering her things, scribbling on her clipboard: a *clipboard!* All my deep dreams awakened at the simple writing utensil, the pen—pen—in her hand. I liked her enough to forgive her the question about bare bottoms. She stood up quickly, checking her watch, and said, "Thanks for talking to me,

Kate."

"You're welcome," I said, and followed her down the stairs.

She paused at the door, briefly thanking my mom. She paused at the door, regarding the white walls and carpets of our house as the safe inner petals of an unblossomed lotus. "You're a very lucky little girl," she told me.

I nodded. I already knew that, if vaguely. And then the woman opened the door into the warm California afternoon.

But before she went she asked me if I need anything else, and fingered her badge. Had I been older, I could have given her some addresses a few streets down, but I didn't know then, and I didn't. Instead I stood there at the door, framed under my innocence. I watched her go, and waited for my blessed life to blossom under the blue sky.

Nonfiction by Katie Kilborn

1,001 Rites

My psychologist is using my therapy sessions as research for his new book. He told me so, I think, as an affirmation one session, marveling at what he termed my "fantastic maturity" as I face the world, moving through new rites of passage: those of "coming out" as a lesbian. I call them "new" rites not to spite or forget those who have struggled before me in generations past, but to make a distinction which my therapist will soon market as his own observation. The rise of hate-related violence, of religious proscriptions, and of administrative hysteria in schools (an exponential growth in only the past five years), reflects the rising trend in teenagers "coming out," announcing their diverse sexualities as young people – younger, it seems, than ever before. The reactions to this phenomenon have changed the accompanying rites dramatically.

What previous era has seen such a rise in the proposed establishment of gay-straight youth alliances in high schools? When before now has the "gay vote" mattered so much, or been pandered for quite as diligently, in presidential elections? Indeed, as Al Gore and Bill Bradley squared off for the Democratic Party nomination, it seemed that he who marketed himself as most gay friendly had the greater chance of winning. Of course, the question of gay marriage versus domestic partner benefits mean little to the adolescent homosexual. The fact remains, however, that these issues were discussed as publicly as tax break promises and military sending plans, opening a field of discourse previously padlocked to high school political science classes, homerooms, and recess fields.

The amount of talk over the issue of homosexuality I think promotes a yearning to establish oneself on one side of the (straight) line or the other, and youth are not exempt from the conversation. Indeed, I came out in my junior year of high school, plagued both by national controversy in the form of Ellen DeGeneres' television outing, and at home in Charlotte, NC with an arts funding fiasco that was sparked by the performance of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Youth years younger than me (thirteen at the time in one case) were prompted to "out" themselves by the same events. Of course my decision was not completely political, nor do I believe it to be so for any of my peers. Its importance in my life, however, was magnified by the amount of attention given it in the public arena; the stakes raised because *it was me and my life* people were debating without realizing it. As a young adult I wanted to be considered in any decisions on my future, if any were to be made.

What follows are some autobiographical sketches of my experience of the rites of coming out. They are overwhelmingly positive, and in all this I cannot forget my peers whose stories are never heard when they need to be, to dispose of the curtain of silence that shades the often horrific and tragic circumstances of these rites. Much of the discrimination that accompanies the rites of coming out has not changed since we began hearing about the phenomenon with the rise of the Gay Rights Movement in the 1960s and 70s. At the same time, I know that I am neither particularly lucky nor alone in my positive experiences decades later.

Here are some of my experiences. I do not think that they are unique; I offer them as one piece of a larger lens – one with the potential to forever change the dominant view of my community for the better.

"Why don't you stay over, Kip? It's late and I don't feel so comfortable with you driving back across town. Anyway, we still have lots to talk about."

Silence, heavy as the unconditioned air doing anything but moving, more, holding us still, on the couch in the yellow room. "Sure." My eyes sticking in their humid sockets, looked anywhere but her. She reached slowly over me, her left breast touching my right thigh through her polo shirt and my dress. She put the phone in my hand. I dialed.

"Mon? Hi. I'm staying at Liz's again, tonight, okay?" My eyes on her face, hers on my knee slipping out bronze from the smooth cut down the length of my blue dress.

"No, no I won't forget to take my allergy medicine. Yes, I have gas money. Uh hum. Love you too. See you in the morning. I should be home pretty early." Early because Abbey the art therapist had to be at work by 7:30.

I hung up. We looked at each other for a while. She took my hand. I put my head on her shoulder and looked at the place where a TV might have stood, had she been able to afford one. Instead I looked at what might, in some lights, have been a white wall, now stained yellow by the bare incandescent bulb above us. On the floor, an oil painting of the side of some woman's face, lit by the light of a kind of morning to which I had never awoken. Sensual morning. With her.

She laughed.

"What?"

"So, you're telling me, huh?"

"Telling you?"

"You've never said it. Not to me."

"What?"

"That you're gay."

"I'm not gay."

"No?"

"No. I'm a lesbian." LllehhZbeeuhn. Lesbian. Smirk. "And you smile with your eyes." She does. We both do, and did, for a minute. Then she kissed me. And this time it didn't feel like it was "supposed to." Like I was "supposed to." For once I didn't immediately flash to scenes of glorious, sweet boy-girl beauty cut through with violins and that soft off-tempo smacking sound. Her lips on mine, caressing my upper lip with their soft underside and a quick brush of the tongue. The Same. as Any. Other. Kiss. Minus the fleeting sense of duty and the pull of confusion to turn me away.

She pulled her head back and smiled some more, this time with her mouth. I pecked hers with mine and giggled. She put her arm on my bare back.

"Sundress and combat boots. Nice."

"I try. My mom hates it." I sat back against the couch and crossed my legs into a square of booted ankle on bare knee, shin shining through. She touched that too, and my skin reached for her as her hand moved up the bone. Her square hand, short-fingered, slid from ankle to knee, to my hand. I thought to stand, then did, and she followed, then led. She put her hand on the bedroom doorknob and looked at me. I. I was. Was I? Ready?

Choose your own adventure: what happens to the blonde virgin and her pirate with the close-cropped hair and one earring? Do they,

A) go through the door, hold hands, stand by the be, undress to the point of embarrassingly ratty pink underwear and surprising cotton boxer shorts, lie down, and hold hands some more;

B) enter the boudoie, one's hand on the other's skirted hips, which then reaches to skirted buttocks and then to the low cut cleavage line, followed by a push to the bed and a slow undressing, after which the blonde sits up, arms crossed over chest, and says, "Um, can we just . . . hold hands for a while?"

C) move into the bedroom, kissing, lie down, kissing, fall asleep, kissing;

D) What's your fantasy? Why?

Intro to Trig and Family Functions

"Open this door right now!" my mother ordered, her voice a thick mix of anger, annoyance, and sleeplessness. It's nine o'clock – do you know where your mother is? I knew only too well.

When I had entered the kitchen upon arriving home, I found my mother at the table, her head in her arms. I swallowed the impulse to rush to her, to see if she was okay, when I saw the Eckerd Home Drug Test on the counter. I rolled my eyes and tiptoed past her, and actually made it to my room successfully. I guessed with some shame that she had been up all night, but then thought again of the blue and white box before her on the table. Narrowing my eyes, I sat down to do the trigonometry homework due in summer school the next day. *No! Fuck it. Fuck her. Drugs!* By the time her knock sounded, pounding, in the room I had finished five problems.

I smirked; school in the summertime, "coming out" to my mother who had been imagining me doing crack (of all things) all night – ridiculous, all of it. Funny, the antacid properties of irony. The nervous

stomachache that had started in the car was gone. Sine plus cosine equals what on a graph? Could it be that all this lying now curving toward a truth-telling, could that be a full circle? With no way out?

"I want to know what you were doing last night. You can't just come home and think everything can go on just as it was, you know. You're in trouble," she warned through the door, her voice never straying far from the low, steady cadences that let me know she thought she was in power.

"I was at a friend's house, mother, like I have been every weekend all summer." If her voice was a wave pattern, mine was a straight line, cutting through the peaks of power, intersecting them with my own.

"Who is Abbey Howe?" *Great question.* What does the line that touches one point on the circle represent?

"A friend."

"Where does a sixteen year old girl meet a twenty-four year old 'friend,' may I ask?" Where do two parallel lines meet?

"Mom, I'm not going to talk to you about this right now. I'm doing my homework, and I don't feel like you're ready to know what I have to tell you. I'm not a drug addict. I'm not a criminal. I want to be left alone." I set out to bisect a line.

"You're a COWARD, you know that? A real coward. I'm ashamed of you."

The horizontal line drawn out before me stretched out blissfully, somehow, straight across the page. With my compass, I had made the proper arcs that would cut that line in half, but at this I hesitated over the attempt. I stabbed the pencil into the thick wad of loose-leaf paper, and stomped to my door. In the double arc of a door opening and slamming shut, I sent the words "I'm GAY, don't you get it?" vectored straight into my mother's puffy-eyed face. In the silence that followed, I sat back down, took my ruler, and split the line, final.

To ease the silence, I hit PLAY on the tape deck by my desk. The pained and yet glorious strains of a woman's voice poured and almost blocked the sound of my mother's bedroom door slamming shut.

"...Imagine you're a girl, just tryin' to finally come clean, knowing full well they'd prefer you were dirty and smiling..."

Saying Yes

It is sometime between twelve and two o'clock in the morning, and I am being made love to in the window-slatted moonlight of my girlfriend's small bedroom. She is on all fours above me, and with half closed eyes I regard the expression of her kisses: bright water blue against black, chin against chin and chest to chest.

We opened a bottle of wine earlier that evening, and so she is relaxed. I could see it in the way she moved toward me after setting her alarm clock; in the amused half smile she wore as she struggled with my underwear; in the way her warm lips lie almost burning on my skin. The picture of peace on the sheets, I struggle inside to let go of the day's tensions holding fast to my neck, my stomach, my back, my thighs. I concentrate on each muscle below where her warmth brushes me in the cool of the room. Yes, let it go, oh Yes, I whisper in my head, and soon I imagine I have sunk entire inches into the bed. This Yes had become my mantra, spreading through me, pulling me into the needling consciousness of each nerve under every one of her touches.

Yes. Yes. I am opening slowly beneath her, from the smooth spreading of thighs to the unconscious yawning of my pores as our heat meets between us, Yes.

Yes...

And I realize just here that this Yes is the key. In my body I say yes to poles that have laid lazy all day as their opposites pulled my muscles into tension, and the Yes moves them to action: force pulling against force until force falls away into balance. In this Yes I am relaxed, and I can say yes to her still more, accepting her kisses, her tongue, her hands.

We do not say No: though this day and days past have pulled us apart, fibrous and static like cotton; though we have suffered humiliations in love and sex and family and life, we do not move to shut them out, or draw blinds against them to keep them hidden to one another. Their white-hot grazes linger on us still, but with each Yes we move into some new territory where the air welcomes us: cool, balmy, moonlit, moving

with us and our Yes.

I wrote previously that this coming out is a new rite. The only other answer for it is naiveté – in an static world, what else but this would allow us to live so much more openly than our predecessors, saying yes to our difference, to our communities, and to the world? I am lucky to be growing up in a world where the "saying" is enough; we do not necessarily have to yell, nor do our words fall on deaf ears. This Yes is the continuing rite, like the thousands we have and will continue to experience each time we acknowledge what is tight within us, each time we open to the movement inside that keeps us on our separate path, forging ahead, brandishing Yes. Saying Yes.

Nonfiction by Jenny Pirkle

Flicker

The first time I saw Jon, he was wearing an ugly, green bucket hat pulled so far down over his eyes that I couldn't tell whether or not he had them open. He was sitting backwards on the picnic table bench, so that his elbows rested on the rust-colored wooden surface behind him. Twenty feet away, the streetlight blinked off, and then on again, giving Jon and the giant pecan tree frozen above him the illusion of movement. He sat perfectly still.

It was early August when I first came to Georgia Southern. The dry summer heat was more than enough to keep most students indoors during the day, but cool breezes after dark kept us out and about until well after a reasonable bedtime every night. One evening during the second week of classes, I found myself at Hendricks, the dorm next door to mine. It was already after midnight, but there were still about twenty people sitting on the front steps of the building. I quickly joined the group. After a few neighborly introductions, I made myself at home on the steps and was later invited inside to watch a movie. My new friends all had a certain smell about them that I couldn't quite place, but I didn't let it bother me. It was nice to be part of their little group, and I decided that since Hendricks was conveniently located and the people were nice, I would spend more of my free nights there than anywhere else, including my own dorm.

It was during my fourth trip to Hendricks that I met Jon. My friends were standing around the small wooden picnic table under the pecan tree in the front yard when I walked up. Most of them were smoking, so I tried to stand upwind of them. I ended up sitting on the tabletop with my feet on Jon's bench. He didn't move.

At around 2:00 AM or so, the group started dwindling, and within minutes, I was alone with Jon. He still hadn't moved or spoken since I walked up. I noticed that he also had that strange smell about him — a sharp smell, but masked relatively well by a slight scent of cherries and cigarette smoke. I thought he was asleep. I stood and stretched my arms out in front of me, yawning. I intended to leave, but one glance in Jon's direction stopped me. He was moving.

The streetlight a few yards away suddenly went out, and for a few eerie seconds, I could barely make out the silhouette of the boy sitting on the bench. When it flickered back on, he was looking at me. The ugly green hat was pulled down over his eyes so that he had to lean his head way back to see out, and I could just spot the two black sparkles beneath the brim. I froze in mid-stretch and stared back at him. Finally, I spoke.

"What?" I said, dropping my arms to my sides and frowning. His gaze made me uncomfortable.

He shrugged and a tiny smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "Nothing," he said. His voice was low and quiet, but clear. "What's your name?"

I wandered around to the other side of the picnic table and sat down, facing him. He turned to look at me. "Jenny," I said. I gestured toward the building. "They've been calling me Jen."

"Which do you prefer?"

I shrugged. "I don't really care, I guess."

"You should," he said.

"Oh yeah? Why's that?"

"It's important," he explained. "See, when you first meet someone, you have to tell him your name, and that sets the tone for your entire relationship. For instance, I might treat you differently if your name were Jen, as opposed to something glamorous like ... Cassandra. If your name were Cassandra, your entire life would be changed." He paused, looking me over. "For the better, I think."

I didn't know whether to laugh at him or to be offended. "Jenny, then," I said. "What's your name?"

The boy sat up straight. "Jonathan Robert Wynn." He spoke slowly, so I wouldn't miss any of it. Then he smiled and gestured toward the building. "They've been calling me Jon."

"Really? And all this time I had you pegged for a Cassandra."

His grin showed all of his teeth, which were slightly too big for his mouth. He certainly had an odd

look about him. He had pale pink lips like a girl, and his smooth, white skin reminded me of a china doll, although his nose was dotted sparingly with tiny brown freckles. I still couldn't see his eyes.

"I can't see your eyes," I said, ducking my head to look under his hat. He pulled the knit thing off, and his shaggy, gray-brown hair stood out in several places. His eyes were the color of sweetened iced tea held in front of a candle. He clutched the ugly green hat with both hands. The streetlight went out again.

"It's my lucky hat," he said. The light came back on.

"Oh." I eyed it curiously. "Why's it lucky?"

"I had it on when my mom died in a car accident four years ago. I hardly ever take it off." He wasn't moving at all, not even blinking. I tried not to blink too.

"It doesn't sound very lucky to me, if she died," I said.

"Well I was in the car, too."

I blinked. "So the hat saved your life?"

"Something did. I like to think the hat helped."

I raised my eyebrows at him, and he went on.

"We all have to believe in something, right? It certainly wasn't the airbag that kept me alive. It didn't even pop out. So I started thinking about it, and I realized what the difference was between my mom and me. She hadn't been wearing a hat." He punctuated this logic by pulling the hat back on over his ears. He flipped up the brim in the front so I could see his eyes.

"So as long as you're wearing it, you can't die?" I asked.

"As long as I'm wearing it, I can't die in a car accident," he amended.

I smiled. "Why didn't you say anything when everyone else was out here? I thought you were asleep. Are you just ... shy, or something?"

"No, I'm not shy," he said slowly. "I'm a spectator. I was watching you."

"You were watching ME?" I was startled and slightly freaked out. His eyes were trained steadily on mine. Why didn't he blink?

"Mostly you. Some of the others, too. But you were the most interesting."

"Well, I think you made a mistake," I said, edging toward the end of the bench. "I'm the most unremarkable person you'll ever meet. Honestly."

He smiled and tilted his head to one side. "I think you're wrong," he said.

"Thanks." The streetlight blinked again. "Well, Jon, it was nice meeting you. I have to go. I have homework," I lied.

"Understood. Goodnight, Jenny," he said.

I walked the fifty or so yards to my dorm, glancing back when I got to the door. He was still there at the picnic table. He had flipped the brim of his hat back down, but I knew he was watching me. I went in.

The next night, I went to Hendricks again. Some of my friends were at the picnic table under the pecan tree, and I walked over to socialize. I was surprised to find that I was disappointed in Jon's absence. I casually asked the others about him, but none of them knew who Jon was. It was only after I mentioned the hat that I got a positive answer. He was in his room, playing his guitar.

Every night, I went over to Hendricks. I had a good time with the people I met there. I flirted a lot with the boys, but Jon was hardly ever outside. Whenever I asked about him, I got weird looks.

"That kid is strange," my friend Playboy said. "You shouldn't talk to him. I heard he does yoga."

When I did see Jon, we talked by ourselves. He still had that sharp, pleasant smell tinged with cherries, and he was never without his hat. I didn't always agree with what he said, but our conversations were fascinating. I never once saw him blink.

"A dragon, eh?" I was making it obvious that I didn't believe him. It was two weeks after our first meeting. We were sitting at the stone picnic table a few feet away from the old site of the wooden one, which had made an impromptu appearance in the tennis court to provide an obstacle for skaters.

"Yes, a dragon," he said. The streetlight flickered.

"Red or green?"

"I've never actually seen it. But I know it's there."

"Oh. So ... what's my inner animal? Does everyone get one, or are you just special?"

"Everyone has one." He looked me up and down, silently. I didn't move. "Yours is a rabbit."

"A rabbit?" I raised my eyebrows. "And what do I do with my rabbit?"

"You absorb the strength and the characteristics of the animal to help overcome any hardships in your life," he explained. "Sort of like protection against predators. Rabbits are very quick, you know."

"Yes, but people don't have predators," I pointed out.

"Of course they do," he said. "Other people."

Jon and I met at the stone picnic table about three times a week. He was my Buddha on the hill.

"Wynndom?" I asked, propping my head on one hand. "What the hell is Wynndom?" The streetlight blinked again.

"My kingdom," he said, matter-of-factly. "I'm surprised you haven't heard of it."

"So you're a... king," I said, doubtfully.

"I think we all have our own kingdoms," he said. "Right now I'm just looking for my queen."

I batted my eyelashes at him. "Have anyone in mind, your majesty?"

He grinned. "Maybe."

"Well, do you need a court jester?" I giggled. "If so, you know where to find me."

"Court jester?" he repeated. "Alright." Then, smiling, he added, "But don't be surprised if you get bumped up to lady in waiting."

Once, I found Jon seated on the curb underneath the streetlight. The smoke alarm had gone off in his dorm. He'd managed to escape without harm, the ugly hat perched safely on his head. I plopped down next to him as the other residents filed back inside.

"What's the worst thing you've ever done?" I asked.

"The worst thing?" He looked down, tracing the edge of the sidewalk with one finger. "I've done a lot of bad things in my life. I don't know if I could pick one thing."

"The most morally wrong, then." I smiled at him. "Do you know what morals are, Jon?"

He grinned evilly. "Alright. I've never told anyone this before." He paused for a moment as the streetlight flickered, then went on. "You know how they have open house at school the day before classes start, so that the new kids can meet their teachers?"

"Yeah?"

"During open house my senior year of high school, I had sex in the music room with some girl and left a loaded condom in the teacher's filing cabinet."

"No, you didn't!"

He smiled. "I did indeed."

"Well," I said, "what did you file it under?"

"F," he said.

A few days later, we were back at the stone picnic table. "I wrote a song for you, you know," he announced.

"No, I didn't know." I was pleasantly surprised. "Can I hear it?"

"No." He smiled.

I frowned. "Why not?"

"I left my guitar in my room," he said.

"Well, go get it," I said. "I'll come with you. I haven't seen your room yet."

"No," he said. Then he added, "I don't want to risk you getting in trouble."

"But you have 24-hour visitation. I won't get in trouble for being in your room."

"That's not what I... meant," he said, obviously distracted. He was looking past me. I turned around and saw two boys standing on the steps of the dorm, motioning to Jon. "I have to go. Goodnight, Jenny."

I turned to watch him go inside with the two boys. They glanced around nervously before disappearing into the building.

After about 6 weeks of seeing Jon every other night or so, I found out what the strange, sharp smell on his clothing was. I had gone over to Hendricks again for a late night visit and found several people all crammed around the stone picnic table, Jon in the middle of them, laughing and talking loudly. I immediately sensed something was wrong because I had never heard Jon's voice above his usual quiet rumble. I approached slowly, in his line of sight. I noticed that he wasn't wearing his hat.

"Hey Jen," he said. "Come sit next to me." He looked at the four other giggling people on his side of the table. He shoved the one next to him. "Man, scoot the hell over!" he said, and started laughing. I walked

over to him and settled into the tiny space he'd made on the bench. That smell was overpowering.

"So what have you been up to this glorious evening?" Jon asked, to a chorus of giggles. He laughed, too, and said, "Matt, man, you're fucking... you're fucking leeeeeeeaning, man!" The giggles got louder, and one girl fell off the bench, which made the laughter worse. "He's fucking leeeeeeeaning!" Jon said to me, swaying on the bench.

He was right. The boy in question was standing lopsided next to the picnic table, a huge smile on his face. I wondered how he was staying up.

"You want some bud?" Jon asked me, pulling a joint out of his pocket.

"No," I said.

He slipped the marijuana back in and patted it, leaning closer to me. "Just let me know," he whispered, grinning like an idiot. He kissed me on the mouth then, and I turned away, suddenly feeling very uncomfortable. I just sat there listening to the giggles and hilariously unfunny conversations around me. What was it that Jon had called himself when I first met him? A spectator.

The streetlight went out for a few seconds, allowing the campus police to walk up unnoticed. I was the first one to spot the two men, but the others saw them relatively quickly. Everyone got quiet. Jon's hands were resting on the tabletop, and I could see him fighting the urge to reach into his pocket.

"You all doing alright this evening?" one officer asked. No one answered him. We looked around at each other, wide-eyed. The other officer spoke up.

"We thought there'd be a party over this way. Guess we were right, 'cause I know that sure ain't pipe tobacco I've been smelling." The first officer smiled wryly and told us all to stand up but not to go anywhere. They worked together, searching us two at a time. I had never been patted down before, and I immediately decided I didn't like it. Of course I didn't have anything on me. Only one out of our group did.

They took him away in handcuffs as the rest of us sat silently, watching. I heard the policeman's fading voice while they marched him to the car. "Anything you say can and will be used against you..."

The next night, I saw Jon with his father, loading the things from his dorm room into a waiting van. The last thing he brought out was his guitar. I didn't say goodbye to him. I sat on the steps to my dorm and watched Jon and his father get into the van, not speaking to each other. I couldn't move. The only thought I could focus on was the fact that Jon wasn't wearing his hat.

As they pulled away from the parking lot, I realized suddenly that I had never seen Jon in the daylight. In fact, the only light I had ever seen shine on him came from the flickering streetlight a few yards away. They had just turned a corner when I glanced up at the pole by the road.

The light had just gone out.

One-Act Play by Lauren Gunderson

Background

*A dramatic juxtaposition of RALPH Alpher's life and his physics
Based on a true story*

LIST OF CHARACTERS:

RALPH ALPHER: *Physicist, 58, a paunch and a worn face.*

ALIZA ALPHER: *His daughter, 26, simple, pretty, pregnant.*

MIRIAM: *RALPH's wife, strong, smart. Also plays his mother.*

GRAY: *Neutral character, late twenties. Represents the following parts:*

*Arno Penzias, (Ahmo Pen-zee-uhs):
Nobel Prize-winning scientist, nice guy.*

*Robert Herman:
Alpher's colleague.*

*George Gamow, (Gam-off):
Alpher's mentor, loud and Russian.
Various others.*

TIME: *The structure of the play mimics the study of cosmology, or the origins of the universe, by moving backwards in time. As the play progresses, ALIZA becomes more protective, RALPH more distracted, and GRAY more in control.*

AT RISE: *Black out. Only the voices are heard.*

ALIZA (as a young girl): Daddy?

RALPH: Yes, dear.

ALIZA: Is it raining outside?

RALPH: Yes. No stars tonight. Maybe tomorrow.

ALIZA: I have to wait till tomorrow?

RALPH: Yes. Goodnight.

(Silence.)

ALIZA: Daddy?

RALPH: Yes.

ALIZA: What are you working on?

RALPH: The same work, Aliza.

ALIZA: A paper?

RALPH: Yes.

ALIZA: Which one?

RALPH: I... don't know.

ALIZA: Daddy?

RALPH: Yes, honey, and what time is it, for Pete's sake?

ALIZA: Does outer space have a name... besides outer space?

RALPH: ...What?

ALIZA: It's two in the morning. Space... did someone name it?

RALPH: No.

ALIZA: Why not?

RALPH: That's like asking if God has a name. Its just... universe.

ALIZA: Universe isn't a name.

RALPH: Aliza's a name, universe is a name. Two A.M.? You should be sleeping. Go.

ALIZA: It's got to have some name. Its not fair if it doesn't.

RALPH: Aliza, what would you like me to do about it?

ALIZA: Name it now.

RALPH: Bed. Now.

ALIZA: How about...

RALPH: James. Jacob. Paul. Roger...

ALIZA: Hannah!

RALPH: What?

ALIZA: Its name...

RALPH (not paying attention): Hannah... perfect.
(Lights up, soft blues and greens. ALIZA and RALPH are onstage.)

(ALIZA, in present 1978, speaks as though she's been in RALPH's hospital room for days waiting for his recovery.)

ALIZA (remembering): Perfect... like music. *Uni* meaning "one." *Verse*... like a song, like a symphony, or a poem. "One" "song". Universe...

RALPH: That's not what it means.

ALIZA (not hearing him): I know... I just think it's coincidentally lyrical. Easy to grasp.

RALPH: The universe is not easy to grasp.

That's why I still have a job. The more we don't know the more I get paid.

ALIZA: Daddy. It's raining outside.

RALPH: I know. It's cold too.

ALIZA: It's 1978, September.

RALPH: Yes, I know. Good God, what time is it?

ALIZA: Inside, it's so quiet. Barely any here, in here.

RALPH: I know. It was cold when I left. I brought a jacket.

ALIZA: Too quiet. Too much space to fill by myself. And yet, nothing...

RALPH: Calm after the storm. Isn't that right?

ALIZA: Not tonight. Please, Dad.

RALPH: Something is tonight, isn't it?

ALIZA: I don't know...

RALPH: It is, isn't it?

ALIZA: I mean I do know, but I didn't know then how much this ate at you... how much you...

RALPH: Yes.... Things find their importance in time... importance does not always find the things.

(Pause.)

ALIZA: My name is Aliza. It means "joyful" in Hebrew. I'm your daughter.

RALPH: I know what it means, I know who you are...

ALIZA: Your name is Ralph. You're a scientist, a teacher. A father, a husband, and a grandfather in three weeks.

RALPH: I know who I am...

ALIZA: Three weeks, Daddy...

RALPH: Three weeks?

ALIZA: Her name will be *Hannah*, it means "child of god." She'll be born three weeks from tonight.

RALPH: Tonight... yes... something is tonight... where am I?

(GRAY enters slowly, watching the two. He is unnoticed by RALPH.)

GRAY: A diner. On 4th and Main street. Meeting a scientist to talk...

RALPH: I'm waiting, isn't that right? Waiting in a diner...

ALIZA: She'll be born in three weeks. They say she'll be perfect...

RALPH: Oh yes.

ALIZA: Wait for her.

RALPH: Yes. Wait. The game without a winner.

ALIZA: It's so cold in here...

RALPH: Waiting like a stone in a river. So much happening and rushing beside, and you, still and wet holding the spot where first you fell. Where

you first made that discovery.

ALIZA: ...tonight.

RALPH: There is nothing "made" about discovery. Science is all finding, not making, not creating, but finding. And finders win. And I don't.

ALIZA: Daddy.

GRAY: 9:30 a.m. Sept. 15th, 1978. Two weeks before the Nobel Prize awards ceremony, Ralph Alpher has a heart attack.

RALPH: Yes. In two weeks, he gets the prize, the credit, history's blessing.

GRAY: Back, one day. Sept. 14th, 1978. Arno Penzias needs help with his speech. He's won the prize and forgot the history.

RALPH: He's getting the prize for the work I predicted, for my math. And he asks me what's going on in my field, in my world...he asks me to meet him in a...

GRAY: ... diner on 4th and Main street.

ALIZA: Where's your jacket, Daddy, it's cold.

GRAY: September 14th, 1978. Tonight, Ralph Alpher meets Arno Penzias on an invitation. Penzias asks his advice on cosmology...

RALPH: General cosmology...

GRAY: ...for Penzias's acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize awards ceremony in two weeks. Penzias asks for a review to get him up to date.

RALPH: Up to date.

GRAY: Sept. 14th.

ALIZA: Tonight they meet in a diner on 4th and Main.

GRAY: Tonight they meet in a memory.

RALPH: Tonight is all I have. Isn't that right....

ALIZA: Tonight...

RALPH: Tonight I meet the man on his invitation, to talk science...

ALIZA: This isn't science anymore. This is pure spite.

GRAY: This is history...

RALPH: YES. 1965 Penzias and Wilson, two radio scientists working at Bell Labs in Massachusetts, accidentally discover cosmic background radiation while trying to fix a radio dish. They win the Nobel Prize.

But THIS is history *too*: a young Ralph Alpher meets with displaced Russian physicist George Gamow. Gamow convinces Alpher to study the origin of the universe. The two begin as far back to the beginning of time as possible, where physics begins. As they work their way from the original explosion of energy and waves to the present day of solid matter and 117 elements, they realize

that there may still be remnants of the initial explosion in our world today. This remnant is in the form of light waves flooding the universe... we call it cosmic background radiation. We write the papers, we present the math, we are forgotten for twenty years.

Now I meet the man for dinner tonight.

GRAY: Too fast. Start here. At the beginning.

RALPH: I've never been to the beginning before. It's impossible. You have to start where things start, not the beginning.

GRAY: The beginning...

RALPH: ...is the end. I wrote the book on it.

ALIZA: Daddy... please...

RALPH: Literally.

GRAY: I know.

ALIZA: Please be careful. You'll be a grandfather.

RALPH: Yes.

ALIZA: Daddy....

RALPH: Yes...

ALIZA (to GRAY): Please...

(GRAY carries a change of clothes. A simple brown suit, printed tie, sweater, hat, briefcase. GRAY changes clothes as ALIZA stands beside him. He is now Penzias.)

GRAY: Sept. 14th, 1978. A diner. 8:30pm.

ALIZA: He'll wait for Mr. Penzias for another three minutes. Then they'll talk, about things besides the Prize and beyond words. They'll talk about kids, Penzias has two, Daddy has two. They'll talk about cosmology, Penzias has forgotten the basics, Daddy is the basics forgotten. They'll each share a secret, and one will stand up to fight. Then they'll leave and not see each other's faces in person again. Two weeks from now, Penzias will receive the Noble Prize for physics. Two weeks from now, Daddy will suffer a stress-induced heart-attack, and lie in a hospital room under lights similar in fluorescence... to these.

(Suddenly they are in the Diner. GRAY enters and looks around the diner. There is no one there but Alpher. He waits to be acknowledged but isn't. Approaches in a jovial manner.)

GRAY: Ralph? Mr. Alpher?

RALPH: Yes.

GRAY: Arno Penzias. Glad to meet you finally.

RALPH: Yes.

GRAY: Thank you so much for this. This is a treat, really great of you. I can't tell you how nice it is to get a break from all the rushing around I've

been doing...

RALPH: I bet. It must be quite a change from your normal life.

GRAY: A change, yes. Normal life, I don't think I ever had one. Science is quite a ride, isn't it. I was completely out of the loop. I tell you my son, Greg, had to bring home the darn newspaper to convince me they were giving us the prize. I'd almost forgotten about it. I was... I'm still a little shocked.

RALPH: Well... It's an important discovery.

GRAY: Yes. I'm very proud.

RALPH: Me too.

GRAY: Very lucky...

(Direct silence.)

GRAY: So you're here for a conference?

RALPH: Yes, I'm speaking at Rutgers University in the afternoon tomorrow.

GRAY: Wonderful. Cosmology I assume?

RALPH: Cosmology. A review of sorts... creation of the universe, final moments of expansion and such.

GRAY: Such interesting stuff... Jeez, it just blows my mind every time. Creation of the universe... back to beginning, huh?

RALPH: Yes, Mr. Penzias... when studying the beginning you must work backward to find it. The present is where we start; creation is our conclusion.

GRAY: Yes, of course. Which reminds me...

RALPH: You'd forgotten something?

GRAY: No. No. Of course not... it's just... with the prize so soon, I'm a little off my rocker. Let's just get to the meat, huh. Tell me, if you would, about the latest developments in cosmology. Big Bang and so forth...

RALPH: Yes...

GRAY: Tell you the truth, I'm a little nervous. I'm not up to speed. I mean... I really don't deserve much besides a *perseverance* award. I understand you wrote the book, literally, on the radiation.

RALPH: And I wrote it twenty years before you.

Is that your secret? That you don't deserve it?

GRAY: Not much of a secret. I'm not much of a cosmologist. I'm a radio scientist.

RALPH: And I'm the secret. And I don't want to be hidden anymore. The beginning of the universe started as *my* doctorate... and ended as a paper forgotten for twenty years.

GRAY: I hope you don't think this meeting catty on my part. I'm sorry your work wasn't acknowl-

edged right away.

RALPH: Isn't acknowledged. Is not.

GRAY: It's just what happens. It's the way things work.

RALPH: I told them the way things worked. I wrote how it happens and what would be left as proof of it. And the only thing left as proof of that, is me.

GRAY: It's just human error.

RALPH: The eternal terrorist against truth.

GRAY: Ralph...

RALPH: Unfortunately, science is about credit. The lasting benefit of our work is the future fame of someone else. We are standing on the shoulders of giants because that's the only way to the top.

GRAY: I'm sorry.

RALPH: And I hate that. But I knew it when I started.

GRAY: Mr. Alpher...

RALPH: *This* was not only taken from me, but for twenty years forgotten, and before that laughed at. I don't want to have everything. I don't want to know everything. I just want my children, my peers, my mother to understand me. Not even understand the work. But me. Why I work, why I tend this idea, why I...

GRAY: Die tonight?

(Pause. GRAY begins to take of his Penzias outfit.)

RALPH: No.

GRAY: Die tomorrow?

RALPH: NO. That's not me...

GRAY: It's a heart attack. Stress induced. You'll be in the hospital on Grant Street by Sunday in a room with strangely similar fluorescence as these pale tubes in the diner in which you are currently finishing your life and your coffee.

RALPH: GOD DAMMIT! NO!

GRAY: Your life and your coffee.

RALPH: I swear to god that's not me - that's NOT me. I don't go like that.

GRAY: Go like what? Two secrets, one threat. Dinner's over.

RALPH: NO.

(GRAY puts on his hat and walks out of the diner.)

ALIZA: Back one month, August 1978.

(A phone rings and RALPH lifts his head. ALIZA gives him a receiver.)

RALPH: Yes. Speaking. Yes... I know who you are, Mr. Penzias. Congratulations on your... yes. I'm teaching the very subject at Union College in

New York. Yes... To meet? With me? Yes... I think that will work. I'll be speaking at Rutgers' Friday morning... Thursday night would be fine. Dinner would be fine... the 14th at 8:30. I'll be there... You're welcome... Anything I can do to help.

(ALIZA takes the phone.)

ALIZA: Back again. Another two months before that. June.

(GRAY changes into Robert Herman's hat and coat.)

GRAY (as Herman): Ralph. They've announced the Prize winners. Penzias and Wilson are up for physics. *(no response)* They'd have given it to George is he was still here, I bet you money.

RALPH (stout): I know.

GRAY: You heard already?

RALPH: I saw it coming...

GRAY: The fact that they *knew* about us, they had to. They couldn't have ignored every letter we sent for the past 10 years.

RALPH: No. They couldn't.

GRAY: Even Penzias and Wilson knew. They didn't even invite us to see the damn radio either. Not even that gesture. Are we invisible here?

RALPH: No.

GRAY: It's deliberate then?

RALPH: It's perfect, Robert. We are partners in an... uncaring field. Science doesn't care who found it first; it'll go on and on, without discovery... apparently so will we.

(GRAY removes the hat.)

ALIZA: Back again, two years.

(obviously interrupting her father)

Daddy I... oh. I'm sorry.

RALPH (covering up): What? Nothing. I'll be down in a minute.

ALIZA: Back again, a few minutes. I've never actually seen this part.

(RALPH is looking at a newspaper. He's got paper and pen in his hand. He has been sitting still since the phone call... slowly he bends his head and cries.)

ALIZA: Back again. Four years. 1968.

RALPH: Give me my jacket, Aliza.

ALIZA (she is 14): Yes, Daddy.

RALPH: Tell your mother I'm leaving for the funeral. I don't want her coming, she's too sick. I'll be back in a few hours.

ALIZA: Okay. Sure... Daddy?

RALPH: I'll be back by 7. Tell your mother I'll pick up something to eat on the way back.

ALIZA: Daddy?

RALPH: Yes?

ALIZA: Who died?

RALPH: George Gamow. A friend. A heart attack.

ALIZA: I met him...

RALPH: Yes you did.

ALIZA: He...

RALPH: Was my mentor when I used to work for... He helped me when I was younger.

ALIZA: Oh.

RALPH: Tell your mother.

ALIZA: I will...

Back again... 1966.

(MIRIAM enters frazzled.)

RALPH: Write again.

MIRIAM: Ralph, stop this. You're killing yourself over this. Please.

RALPH: Write. Again.

ALIZA: Back again.

RALPH: Write him again.

ALIZA: Back again. Two weeks. No response.

RALPH: Write. Mr. Dicke. Again.

MIRIAM: Ralph. No.

RALPH: AGAIN.

ALIZA: Back. The first letter comes.

RALPH: What does it say? What did he say, Robert?

(GRAY changes into Herman's hat.)

GRAY: "Dr. Alpher, Dr. Herman..."

(Reads the letter. Looks up.) He said he'd... never seen our work before. He said he'd never heard of it, read it, seen it, or used it.

(Silence.)

RALPH: I don't believe him. Write again.

ALIZA: Back again, two weeks before.

RALPH *(writing)*: "Dear Mr. Dicke, I'm sure you know of the problems arising with the credit due for the amazing discovery of cosmic radiation. I'll be straight with you. Enclosed is the certification of an article published in 1948 that contains in it the clear and distinct mathematical predication of such radiation. We simply want to be mentioned as the forerunners of this discovery. I've included the accurate references reflecting our involvement in this breakthrough. Yours, Dr. Ralph Alpher and Dr. Robert Herman."

ALIZA: Back again.'65. Good news.

GRAY *(as Herman)*: Ralph!... Ralph... they found it.

RALPH: Robert...What?

GRAY: They found it yesterday. Two radio scientists at Bell Labs. We're right, they found it!

RALPH: Who? What?

GRAY: Two scientists. The radiation. They found it.

RALPH: They found it?

GRAY: It's perfect.

RALPH: We're right?

GRAY: 3.5 degrees Kelvin.

RALPH: We're right?

GRAY: We're right!

RALPH: Well where's the damn paper?! GOD-damn! We've got to celebrate. We've got to call somebody... they'll probably be calling us soon.

GRAY: Miriam's bringing the papers over. The Times and the Journal and anything else she finds on her way over.

RALPH: God DAMN! Does George know? I'm sure he does. Have you called him?

GRAY: I'm sure he'll call soon. We'll all be drunk by dinner!

(MIRIAM enters with papers.)

MIRIAM: I have three and James is bringing the rest. Congratulations.

RALPH: Don't hold the presses, let's see.

GRAY: This could be big, Ralph. This could be very big. I don't want to say it but...

(They each take a paper.)

RALPH: Nobel big...

(MIRIAM has been reading and puts down one paper without saying anything. They look at her and begin reading themselves.)

MIRIAM *(reading)*: "3 degrees Kelvin. Almost perfect... Penzias and..."

GRAY: "Wilson... Bell Labs... Early prediction..." *(finishes reading. Nothing.)*

RALPH: What does yours...?

GRAY: Nothing.

MIRIAM: Nothing.

(Silence.)

RALPH: It doesn't mention us? At all? *(silence)*

Call George. He's got to know what's going on. They'd call him first.

MIRIAM: Who?

RALPH: The Review... The Journal...

GRAY: They must've known about us... they had to've.

MIRIAM: Does Dr. Gamow know?

(phone rings. MIRIAM hands RALPH the receiver.)

RALPH: Yes? George, hello. Did you...? Yes. I know neither did the ...*(looks)* Journal. No... I just don't understand... It's our work... I know I know... What time'll you come in?... I'll meet you at the station. Yes. Goodbye. Nothing.

GRAY: No mention? Did he know why?

RALPH: Said there was a man working independently at Princeton. Said the guy predicted it and was working on the telescope when Penzias and Wilson accidentally picked up the sounds...

MIRIAM: What?

RALPH: Separate and distinct events.

GRAY: But...we were first... we've been first for twenty years.

RALPH: George said he's on his way. We'll get this straightened out. We'll clear this up. It's just a matter of proof, of credit...we'll write Mr. Dicke tomorrow.

ALIZA: Back again, ten years. My brother is born. I am born. A perfect nuclear family orbiting the happy future we don't yet know.

(The four actors situate themselves for a family photo. They smile.)

ALIZA: Back again. Twenty years... twenty years until everyone knows.... This is Daddy's father reading the newspaper that says his son has set the math that predicts an expanding universe that began in a single fireball.

(GRAY sits as RALPH's father.)

ALIZA: Back again, two weeks before that, Daddy defends his dissertation to a room packed for any scientist, especially a grad student. Dr. Gamow is proud. Daddy is nervous. And the world is about to learn what it will soon forget.

(GRAY changes into Gamow.)

RALPH *(younger, nervous)*:

There are 300 people here.

GRAY: It's okay.

RALPH: There are THREE hundred people here.

GRAY: Looks like two hundred have cameras.

RALPH: Reporters?

GRAY: You are a published physicist, my boy. The world wants to know how the world began.

Alpha. Beta. Gamma. *(he laughs)*

RALPH: They want to kill me. They're going to kill me.

GRAY: No. They may want to, but they won't. You're too good.

RALPH: The math is good. I'm just the messenger... a historically easy target.

GRAY: You're right and you're ready. Look smart, don't stutter. It'll be over soon. I'll see you up there.

(Exits and changes hats. Becomes the reporter.)

RALPH: And George goes in. And I go in. And we begin...*(to us)* Gentlemen and ladies of the

faculty. I thank you very much for your time, and Dr. Gamow, I want to thank you for your stimulating aid and advice for my research. Essentially, what I have explored in my studies is the relationship between how and under what conditions the elements were formed in our early universe. Primordial nucleosynthesis. According to my theory the elements were built up by a process of successive neutron-capture. As the universe expanded neutrons decayed into protons and electrons, then neutron-capture produced deuterons; nuclei in turn captured neutrons and progressively heavier nuclei were formed. I have found that in order to allow for such heavier nuclei to form, the "element building process" as I call it, would have to have been only 250 seconds after the start of expansion, at which time the temperature was near to 10^9 degrees Kelvin.

(Silence. RALPH starts again...)

Preliminary calculations based on this theory successfully predict the observed relative abundance data of the heavy elements.

(Silence. Again...)

Extrapolating from our work on the creation and expansion of the universe, Dr. Gamow and I have determined with some assurance that there must be some radiation corresponding to the current temperature of the universe still in existence. We predict some sort of cosmic microwave radiation near to 5 degrees Kelvin.

GRAY *(as a reporter)*: Mr. Alpher. This radiation you're predicting will prove the expanding universe theory... I ask you about your reliance on that theory versus the well-respected static theory, supported most publicly by Dr. Einstein. I trust you've heard of him.

RALPH: Yes. Essentially, expansion is the only theory that allows for this sort of nucleosynthesis. The current model of the early universe is based on matter only. This is simply inconsistent with our determination of the high temperature and density of the early universe.

GRAY: So Einstein is wrong?

RALPH: Misinformed.

GRAY: Mr. Alpher... how long did you say the entire process of early universe nucleosynthesis took, from bang to complete nuclei?

RALPH: 250 seconds, approximately.

MIRIAM: Say it proudly.

RALPH: 4 minutes after initial expansion, sir.

ALIZA: The press goes crazy. The world began in a fireball and in four minutes.

GRAY: Is this expansion still going on?
RALPH: Yes.
GRAY: Where?
RALPH: Everywhere.
GRAY: And the elements just sat around for billions of years?
RALPH: Yes...but...
GRAY: Can we find this left over radiation?
RALPH: We can. Or we could. If we had the right technology. If we had sensitive enough devices, large radios, able to detect temperatures of less than 10 degrees Kelvin, we would see a universe bathed in this light, this background radiation, emitted from the original moment of creation. And if we could find it... we could prove that our universe began in an extremely hot fireball that expanded in a matter of minutes from a single point to almost the size of the universe today.
ALIZA: Four minutes for creation...
RALPH: Four minutes...
GRAY (changes hats, as Gamow): This is great. I'll treat.
(The phone rings.)
ALIZA: Back again. Dr. Gamov is on the phone. They'll publish the Daddy's paper.
(MIRIAM hands RALPH a phone.)
GRAY (as Gamow): Ralphie... the paper will be published in April. April 1st. Fools Day for us, eh?
RALPH: Really? Great.
GRAY: I'll bet you a bar the place is packed for your thesis presentation. Reporters even.
RALPH: No need to bet, my treat. *(hangs up, MIRIAM enters)* This could be big... really big. *(They hug.)*
ALIZA: Back again. Two weeks. Gamow's office.
GRAY: Ralphie! Doctor Alpher, PhD!
RALPH: Not yet, I'm afraid.
GRAY: Nothing to be scared of.
RALPH: Defending my paper is what I mean... and then publication...
GRAY: I know what you mean. And so will your doctoral committee. You still sick?
RALPH: Yes. Very.
GRAY: But you came, with the paper?
RALPH: Yes.
GRAY: No worries, huh?
RALPH: No worries, just the mumps.
GRAY: Is it done?
RALPH: It's here.
GRAY: Good. Good good good.
RALPH: I'm going to bed. *(starts to hand him the*

paper)

GRAY (to himself): I'm going to look this over, add a bit here and there, and send it to the Review. I can almost guarantee publication by spring. The board cannot deny you a doctorate if you're a published physicist, yes? Yes! You look great.
RALPH: I feel like a wet rag... *(taking back the paper).* George?
GRAY: Yes?
RALPH: *What and where* will you be adding to my dissertation...
GRAY: Ralph...
RALPH: *My dissertation?*
GRAY: A long-time fantasy of mine... just a bit of fun for the physicists. Inside joke.
RALPH: Yes...
GRAY: Simple fun that's all, give this business a well-deserved laugh... *(laughs. RALPH doesn't.)*
 So, your name is on the paper. "Alpher," yes. My name will be on it too for advising, "Gamow." All we need is one more to make it complete.
RALPH: Complete?
GRAY: "Bethe." Hans Bethe, from Los Alamos. The paper reads, "Alpher, Bethe, Gamov." Alpha Beta Gamma! *(laughs)* Yes?
RALPH: No!
GRAY: It's a letter to the Review.
RALPH: It's *not* his work.
GRAY: It's fun. Haven't you got a sense of humor?
RALPH: Sense? *You're lecturing me* on having any sense? No! Bethe had nothing to do with it. He's a nuclear physicist, he's in New Mexico... not... no!
GRAY: Ralph... a joke.
RALPH: Dr.... George... I... *(too tired to fight, hands him the paper)*
 I'm going to bed.
GRAY: Good. You need your strength. Go to bed. Tell your wife she's a good girl. No worries, yes?
RALPH: ... No worries. I'm fine. Good night.
ALIZA: Back again. The night before. Writing. *(RALPH types and types. MIRIAM brings paper. He writes the final page and finishes. Hands it to MIRIAM.)*
MIRIAM: Go to bed.
ALIZA: Back again. The night before.
GRAY (entering in a whirl): How is the boy, Miriam?
MIRIAM (biting): Sick, George. How are you?
GRAY: Good. Anxious. How's the paper?

MIRIAM: Not making him any better. He shouldn't concentrate on anything but himself right now Dr. Gamow.
GRAY: Ask him that. He's had this stuff on the brain since he was 5 years old, I'd bet my house and bar on it. I can see his diligence. There is universal organization in his mind and persistence in his eyes.
MIRIAM: His eyes are bloodshot and his mind is resting for the first time in three weeks. Let him sleep.
GRAY: He wouldn't sleep if he fainted. Always thinking. Always... that's why I came. Just to make sure he doesn't kill himself over this thing. He's got too much in him to spend it all in one jump. I tell you this boy could write a Bible if I'd let him.
MIRIAM: Since when do you believe in God.
GRAY: I've always liked a good story.
MIRIAM: A dissertation is enough for now, thank you.
GRAY: This is good stuff, you know. It'll be published by spring. I'll promise him that.
RALPH: Miriam? Who is that?
MIRIAM: Don't get up. It's Dr. Gamow.
RALPH: Let me...
MIRIAM: Ralph.
GRAY: Alpher?
RALPH: Gamow?
MIRIAM: You have the mumps.
RALPH: I have a deadline.
GRAY: I have an idea...
MIRIAM: And I have to type it all.
RALPH: Tell him it'll be in his office tomorrow.
MIRIAM: Ralph.
RALPH: Tell him by 3.
GRAY: What's that?
MIRIAM: It'll be at your office tomorrow, Doctor.
GRAY: Excellent. You're a doll.
MIRIAM: I just type.
GRAY: You love him. You'll have his children. You're more help than you know.
ALIZA: Back again: their *first* meeting.
GRAY: Welcome. So you're the boy that knows so much, yes?
RALPH: No. Not so much, Dr. Gamow. That's why I'm here. To learn.
GRAY: Oh, you've been learning since you were born. Read my books?
RALPH: Yes, every one.
GRAY: Then let's take a rest from all that, shall

we. Let's *do* something, yes?

RALPH: Of course...
GRAY: Let's do something... crazy. Drink?
RALPH: No thank you.
GRAY: Sure?
RALPH: Yes.
GRAY: Yes. Ralph. *What* do you do?
RALPH: Well...I started in chemistry. Then moved to physics...
GRAY: Einstein's field. You're Jewish?
RALPH: Ah... yes.
GRAY: I heard about you and the big boys. MIT rejecting you... what a load of gas. They'll be whining for you back by the time I'm through with you. *(laughs)*
 Now. What do you know about... the beginning of the universe? The origin of the elements? Cosmology? Creation? Vodka?
RALPH: No. Not much sir.
GRAY: Vodka or cosmology?
RALPH: Neither.
GRAY: Good. A perfect dissertation then.
RALPH: Dissertation? For me?
GRAY: It's been something I've wanted to pursue for years now. Where things began to be things we recognize. Or just where things began. I see a flaming fireball that creates all space and matter and energy.
RALPH: Yes...
GRAY: Elements form, galaxies, and little us on little earth. Let's do that.
RALPH: *Do* what?
GRAY: Problem is this. When we start looking backwards, working back to the beginning of time, things start falling apart. Primarily physics.
RALPH: Physics falls apart.
GRAY: It's the heat, the density, the mad rush that was our cosmological beginning. Our math doesn't hold up anymore. BUT...
RALPH: But...?
GRAY: There's proof somewhere... or everywhere. Forget about the exact beginning. We'll start where our physics starts. From there we'll work back to now. Yes?
RALPH: Work *forward* to now, sir?
GRAY: Forward is back, Ralphie. Now our end is our beginning. Welcome to the edge.
RALPH: ... Yes, sir.
ALIZA: Back again... 1940 with my mother: *(As in marriage.)*
MIRIAM: Ralph Asher Alpher.
RALPH: Miriam Denise Coleman.

(GRAY has taken Gamow off, neutral.)

GRAY: I now pronounce you...man and wife.

ALIZA: Back.

RALPH (on the phone): Father. I won't be home this fall. I've been accepted into George Washington University.

GRAY (as his father on the phone.): What will you do for money?

RALPH: I'm working full-time for the John's Hopkins's Applied Physics Lab.

GRAY: Does it pay?

RALPH: As long as there is something they don't understand it does.

ALIZA: Back.

(At a college party.)

MIRIAM: Hello, Ralph.

RALPH: Miriam. I'm so glad you're here.

MIRIAM: You are?

RALPH: Well, it's nice to have someone to talk to. I don't know anyone except James and he makes friends quicker than I do.

MIRIAM: Well... you've just made one pretty quickly.

ALIZA: Back.

(At school, RALPH stands up and bumps into MIRIAM.)

MIRIAM: Oh!

RALPH: I'm so sorry.

MIRIAM: No. I wasn't looking.

RALPH: No. I... I'm sorry.

(Doesn't know what to say.)

MIRIAM: ... Your name is Ralph.

RALPH: Yes... Miriam? I think we have English together.

MIRIAM: Yes we do.

RALPH: Hello.

MIRIAM: Hello.

(Awkward, cute pause.)

RALPH, MIRIAM: Goodbye.

ALIZA: Back.

(GRAY comes onstage as an MIT interviewer.

RALPH is 16.)

GRAY: Son. We are very interested in all your accomplishments. We'd like to offer you a full scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For you Mr. Alpher.

RALPH: Sir, I'm honored.

GRAY: Your dedication is incredible.

RALPH: Yes, sir.

GRAY: Your age is unusual.

RALPH: 16 years old, sir.

GRAY: Your work is impeccable.

RALPH: Thank you, sir.

GRAY: And you're (he stops, checks) ... Jewish.

RALPH: ... yes.

GRAY: Well. Good luck, son. ... goodbye.

ALIZA: Back.

(ALIZA and GRAY are neutral. Through this dialog, RALPH is growing younger, more vulnerable but with the greatest responsibilities of his life. He weakens as the two speak about him.)

ALIZA: He works days so he can study nights.

GRAY: He works days so his family can eat.

ALIZA: He sits alone and reads.

GRAY: He walks alone at nights

ALIZA: Lord knows what he thinks.

GRAY: Say he's a genius.

ALIZA: Say he argued with the rabbi about Genesis...

GRAY: What?

ALIZA: Brought in references and everything. An all out fight.

GRAY: The rabbi won.

ALIZA: I wouldn't be so sure.

GRAY: Who is, these days?

ALIZA: Works as a stage-hand. 50 cents an hour.

GRAY: His mother left him, poor thing.

ALIZA: No. She died.

GRAY: Flat out.

ALIZA: Stomach cancer.

GRAY: He was 15.

ALIZA: 12.

RALPH: Mother?

MIRIAM (enters as his mother): ... Yes Ralph?

RALPH: Can I have this pencil? I found it on the floor in the kitchen.

MIRIAM: Yes, darling.

RALPH: Don't want anyone to fall.

MIRIAM: You're a good boy. How's your science coming?

RALPH: Pretty good. How's dinner coming?

MIRIAM (laughs): Pretty good.

(Pause. ALIZA does not move.)

GRAY (to ALIZA): And back again...

(Nothing happens.)

GRAY: Back. Again.

ALIZA: It's too close. He can't go back anymore.

GRAY: Aliza we have to ...

ALIZA: He's ten years old. He can't do this, he

can't remember anything else...

GRAY: Aliza...

ALIZA: NO. It's too much. He ten years old!

GRAY: Aliza.

ALIZA: NO. He can't...

RALPH: I remember, reading under my sheets, library fines...

ALIZA: Daddy, please...

GRAY: 1912, Max Planck explains the quantum theory of light emissions, black body spectrum. Einstein publishes his special theory of relativity, shifting the world's view of space and time.

ALIZA: Stop it. He's nine years old.

RALPH: I remember candy stores with lemon drops, my mother singing...

GRAY: 1887 Michelson and Morley discredit the aether hypothesis. 1861, James Clerk Maxwell unites light and magnetism in the electromagnetic theory of light.

RALPH: Baseball. Trips to the beach. Hold my hand.

ALIZA: Eight years old. Daddy please... stop this.

RALPH: Backyard camping. Look up. Stars tonight...

GRAY: 1642. Isaac Newton is born. Galileo dies.

ALIZA: Six years old.

RALPH: summers and music...

ALIZA: Please don't do this. Four years old.

GRAY: Keep going back.

RALPH: Papa's hands, a football... (getting dizzy)

ALIZA: Back to what?

GRAY: The end, the beginning, creation according to RALPH.

ALIZA: 3 years old.

RALPH: Momma's laundry. Momma's hair...

GRAY: Kepler, Copernicus, Ptolemy. Mesozoic, Paleolithic.

ALIZA: Two.

GRAY: Life on earth, planets form, galaxies, expansion...

ALIZA: One.

RALPH: Nothing matters. (RALPH touches his chest, labored breathing.)

GRAY: Merging matter, hot gasses, radio waves, microwaves, visible light - red, yellow green blue...

ALIZA: Oh god.

GRAY: Ultraviolet, x-rays, beta, gamma,

RALPH: (the heart attack begins) Oh. God.

ALIZA: Too much.

RALPH: Ohhhh God.

ALIZA: Daddy please.

GRAY (racing now): The closer you get to the beginning the farther away your mind has to move

from the physics you know. 200,000 years till the

beginning - photon de-coupling, light moves freely. 130,000 years, hydrogen forms. 250 seconds ... nucleosynthesis ends. 110 seconds it begins.

RALPH (fighting the pain): I met the man tonight. Penzias and I tonight.

ALIZA: Daddy...

RALPH: What's... what's going on...?

GRAY: 10 seconds, electron positron annihilation. 1 second, proton ratio freezes. 100 nanoseconds, hadrons form from quarks.

RALPH: Oh God...

ALIZA: Oh God... I can't... (exits)

GRAY: 10 picoseconds, spontaneous symmetry breaking.

RALPH: I don't understand...

GRAY: 10^{-23rd} nanoseconds, universal inflation ends, reality expands. 10^{-24th} nanoseconds before, it begins.

RALPH: I don't... oh god.

GRAY: 10^{-26th} nanoseconds, grand unification.

RALPH: Unification of physics...

GRAY: 10^{-34th} nanoseconds and before... the quantum limit of general relativity. The limit...

RALPH: ...the limit of physics... that's where we began...

GRAY: Plank Time. The end of...

RALPH: The beginning of... (moans as his heart arrests)

(Lights out. We still hear RALPH breathing through the dark. Scared breathes but slow. Footsteps coming toward him. They stop. Just voices.)

GRAY: Ralph?

RALPH: Oh god.

GRAY: from here you're on your own.

RALPH: Oh. God.

GRAY: Maybe.

RALPH: What?

GRAY: God depends.

RALPH: On what?

GRAY: On what you do when you can't go any further. When things don't work, when things aren't things anymore, when there is a limit or a

before. When you have to stop or begin. Is that God... or is that just an option.

ALIZA (offstage): Daddy.

MIRIAM (offstage): Ralph?

GRAY: Bang. The beginning... according to you.

RALPH: Nothing's been according to me for 50 years...

GRAY: Maybe it should be.

RALPH: What?

GRAY: For the next 50.

(Blue lights make the stage visible, but barely. ALIZA and MIRIAM have entered.)

ALIZA: Daddy?

MIRIAM: Ralph.

ALIZA: We're here. You're in the hospital.

(Silence.)

MIRIAM: The doctor says its not bad, but... there's not much good about a heart attack.

(Silence.)

ALIZA: I'm so sorry. I didn't understand. You never told us. If I'd known I would've tried to... I don't know... do something. Anything. I would've, I will, do anything.

(RALPH is looking at the sky, quiet. Seeming to receive ALIZA's words from the stars.)

ALIZA: Can you hear me? It's Aliza, Daddy.

(RALPH closes his eyes, face still to the sky.)

RALPH: What time is it?

ALIZA: Two in the morning

RALPH: Is it still raining?

ALIZA: No.

RALPH: Good. Clouds about three, but Sirius is visible through dawn. Venus at 5am. The moon is waxing one quarter, good night for stars.

ALIZA: Yes. *(smiles)* A good night...How about...?

RALPH: Hannah.

(Black out.)

One-Act Play by Katie Kilborn

Underground Transportation

LIST OF CHARACTERS: Characters are manifestations of the gender identity of THE YOUNG WOMAN.

THE YOUNG WOMAN: *She who is the young woman.*

BABY BUTCH/BOY-DYKE: *He who is the young, dominant lesbian.*

THE BLUE BOY: *He who is the androgynous club-goer, into being seen.*

TYLER K: *She who is a female to male transsexual who enjoys exploring sexual and gender identity.*

SETTING: *The set can consist of little more than two rows of chairs facing each other. Even better, a mirror or piece of Plexiglas can hang over one row in the center, to represent a window. The performer will carry a cutesy drawstring backpack (glitter flowers or Backstreet Boys/*NSYNC patches and buttons all the better), a briefcase, a New York City Transit Authority map, and a boombox. She also carries the photocards she passes out during the show, either in her pockets or in her bags. Pre-set the briefcase under her chair; reserve two other seats by placing newspapers on them. The boombox will play the necessary sound effects and songs; if a sound system exists, the boombox will only be necessary for the song interludes.*

AT RISE: *The performer, as THE YOUNG WOMAN, enters with the audience and takes a seat next to one of the reserved chairs. She is wearing the most feminine version of whatever is fashionable—a skirt and tight T-shirt, for instance, and the teeny-bopper backpack. She reads from Kate Bornstein's *My Gender Workbook* as the audience settles. Train sounds come up, and she turns to a nearby passenger to begin.*

THE YOUNG WOMAN: Would you believe I was almost homecoming queen in high school?

(She waits for an answer, then passes out cards with homecoming picture.)

Picture it:
 football field
 fluorescent light
 the football team
 Ms. Congeniality on one side,
 Ms. Best Dressed,

and me.

I swore to god I'd wear pants -- jeans with holes in them --

but my mother,

god bless her,

coerced my thinking

otherwise.

To fully understand the

history

behind all this

I gotta tell you some things --

you gotta know where I'm coming from

to get the full effect

of the horrifying embarrassment

that was this night.

I didn't, like, have my period in the dress or anything

I didn't even trip on the field.

When I was a boy

and I was a boy

back then

way back when...

when I was a boy

I'd have killed

for a girl like her

I dreamed about her at night

she was Donna

and I was Ritchie Valens,

Lou Diamond Phillips version

you know?

But the controls that socialized me

into homecoming queen herself

are multifaceted and varied.

My life as a boy included:

years with no shirt

a decade of wrong bathroom incidents

and more than a few phone calls home from school.

Then years of wondering why I had to wear a shirt what with not having tits and all.

At eleven years old

I got a psychologist.

She told me

no, I wasn't any kind of boy

and boy

did I need a training bra.

I thought,
 training for what?
 I was seventeen years old
 when I finally got my period
 a day late and a dollar short
 did that make me a woman?
 make me
 a woman
 make
 me
 a woman?
 Or was it
 the five years I spent
 growing my hair long
 and padding my bra
 so I could
 fit
 in
 to a world of illusions
 even when I didn't
 fit
 in
 my own body?
 From readyssetgo
 with the training bra on
 my self and my world
 were training me
 training me to
 be
 and it's funny what a piece of clothing
 will train you to see.
 (And in between all of that
 what about sexuality?)
 Someone once asked me
 on a train like this
 in full, strange public,
 How long I'd been gay
 whether I am totally lesbian
 or more bi than straight
 "And you're wearing the pants
 does that make you
 the man?"
 "Are you asking who I fuck
 or who the fuck I think I am?"
 I asked said concerned citizen.
 Confused at the distinction
 this woman turned and ran.
 (Train sounds rise again.)
 Now I don't expect y'all to see
 what's inside of me.
 You couldn't anyway --
 we're not trained that way --

to be sensitive.
 Some kind of defensive convention:
 we're taught not to mention
 anything a little
 queer.
 So of necessity comes invention
 the girls who feel like boys start to dress
 in a way that says *yes*
 to anyone looking through what we learned
 about style and intention.
 I came to New York
 in between definitions.
 A dyke in my head
 I went swimming in the East Village
 bar scene
 came out wondering
 where the hell I had been
 all along.
 It's not about your hair
 or what you wear
 look around you --
 anybody anywhere
 could be a
 fellow traveler.
 I feel like I'm on the F
 Brooklyn bound
 the way it comes up
 from underground
 into the light.
 Sexuality and gender is one long
 soul train
 in this town
 and all the girls are on board.
 (Train sounds)
 Its not about your hair
 or what you wear
 Did you notice
 I'm wearing a skirt today?
 Found it in my closet
 balled up between some Tevas
 and a pair of straight legged Dickies,
 under a bunch of wide silk shirts
 made for men.
 Thought I'd try it on
 let the breeze flow with ease
 between my legs.
 (THE YOUNG WOMAN pulls out her NYC
 Transit Authority map and unfolds it wide.)
 I was checking my direction
 on a map in Grand Central.
 A short guy in a suit
 cute

but not my
 -type-
 entered into the
 intimate zone
 of my personal space,
 asked me which way I
 wanted to go.
 I said
 "I just need to get from here to there."
 He said
 "Baby,
 I'd take you anywhere.
 Why don't I give you my number
 and you can call me when you get yourself
 safely home."
 He followed me to the platform
 like a dog sniffing after a bone
 I turned around
 stared him down
 said
 Sure,
 I'd give him my number
 and just to play, I heard myself say
 "If you like
 boys
 anyway."
 Shocked, his jaw dropped
 "You're a -- a -- a...?"
 "Yeah."
 He turned with nothing else to say,
 turned on his Armani heel and walked away.
 So I got on the train
 to ride it out,
 went underground
 to talk about
 what we don't
 talk about
 on the street.

SCENE II

(Train sounds rise. THE YOUNG WOMAN
 studies the map, perhaps she changes seats.)
 I once rode the 1 and 9 from Van Courtland Park
 all the way to South Ferry.
 I don't know how many blocks that is
 just a dip under the river
 and a whole lot of time.
 You don't sense much on that kind of ride;
 maybe you don't even think "rapid" transit
 should ever take that long.
 I certainly never believed I could
 fall asleep against the roar of the tracks,

though I'd seen a few Hassids roll their eyes back
 behind the prayer books they'd been reading
 on the ride home from work.
 Man, I fell *hard* --
 I'd been up all night
 talking art with a Chicana
 who couldn't remember my name
 when morning came.
 When I felt the train scrape across the curve
 of Manhattan Island
 down in the place where they tell everybody to
 get the hell off
 I jumped out of the dream
 couldn't believe all that I had seen
 as I had arrowed
 unconscious
 through the heart of the city.
 (THE YOUNG WOMAN leans in to tell this
 story.)
 I dreamed that I woke up
 -- and here the weirdness began --
 in the loft bed of the store room
 I rented on 1st Ave.
 I was late!
 I bolted from my bunk and shot down the ladder
 turned on the taps as I emptied my bladder
 put my hands in the cool sink stream
 that faded between rust-tinged and clean.
 I got up from the pot
 turned the taps on to hot
 and splashed water on my face.
 I'd opened my eyes
 and jumped back from the mirror
 at what I had seen appeared.
 (Still mesmerized in the moment she is recounting, THE
 YOUNG WOMAN unconsciously pulls a photo out
 of her pocket or bag, and hands it to the passenger next
 to her.)
 My face
 yes mine, but with
 hair --
 stubble and a mustache.
 I breathed calm,
 bent forward.
 The face, like a photo
 stayed still.
 My face, yes mine
 but with
 hair
 this time?
 The first thought to cross my mind?
 Sure,

"Oh FUCK!" and "What the bloody hell!"

But too:

"I don't have
a razor."

As if, in the dream, I'd always had hair
but demanded that
this face
stay clean-shaven.
The thought of greeting the world with
this face

-- Don Johnson gone Chong --
had me mortified like as though
I'd worn soiled panties on a date
and was about to get laid --
or not.

I ransacked the room
found shaving soap and a leg razor,
then fought with my self
-- who seemed to know --
that

"You can't use a leg razor on the face.

If that was true,
then why had your dad
always gotten so pissed
when you borrowed his Bic
for a quick morning shave?
That is,
back when you did shave."

I was pissed
I was later
but I couldn't stop staring
I couldn't stop caring
about what They would think
when I walked out the door.
I saw the faces of my friends
would they think
"Poor, poor kid,
what a mess she's in now."
Would they be afraid and run
from the
man-girl freakshow
I'd become?

As I spiraled through neurosis
after Seinfeld would envy me
neurosis,
the face calmed me down.
Didn't say a word
didn't move its lips
I looked deep in its eyes
(my eyes its eyes)
and she told me
right to the back of my soul

I heard him say,

"Maybe it's supposed to be this way."

Then the grating of wheels with no axles to bend
on the curve of the island
even subway miners couldn't mend
the screech and the racket woke me up once again.
Awake for real this time, right?

I shot up and stared at the black mirror of glass
the window lit up against the unending black
of the tunnel that took me from one end and back
of the city that saved me
the city that woke me
the city that took me for the ride of my life
from a limit of girl
to one end of boy
and there
alone
I sat.

SCENE III

*(THE YOUNG WOMAN hits play on
the boombox, and Three Finger Cowboy's "Trouble
Yum," available Daemon Records, blasts through the
car.)*

*Oh lordy here she comes
That girl is trouble, yum
Hang onto your pajamas
The girl is trouble, yum
Do what you're going to
I only want to rock with you...
Good heavens here she comes
that girl is trouble, yum
Go on and tell your mama
the girl is trouble, yum
But don't wait for her
because you'll be waiting for the rest of your life
you're seeing double
oh that girl is nothing but trouble!
Here she comes
she's trouble, yum!
Here she comes
she's trouble, yum
Here she comes, she's trouble, yum
Ooooooh yeah!*

*(As the song plays, THE YOUNG WOMAN
produces cargo pants and a white T-shirt from her
backpack. She then unfolds her map, handing each side
to the passengers next to her. She undresses and
redresses behind the map, dropping items like her bra
and the boy's underwear she is wearing into the aisle.
When dressed, she begins to pick up the clothing and
pack it into the backpack. She mumbles, "Excuse me*

*while I repack my gender baggage," loud enough to be
heard over the song. By the end of the last chorus, she
has changed clothes into her identity as the BABY
BUTCH/BOY-DYKE, and she stands at
attention.)*

BABY BUTCH/BOY-DYKE: If Barbie set the
standards for gayboy tastes,
then for girls, I say
G.I. Joe never knew he was making such a fashion
statement.

You ever see yourself in some misplaced mirror
or on the reflective foundation of a skyscraper?
You're walking along to the music in your head
and you trip
when you see that reflection.
You trip
on how different you look
from what you believed,
maybe your whole life,
maybe just from the moment you stepped out the
door.

You trip
maybe you stumble.
You look at yourself
maybe for a little longer than you feel
comfortable.
You wonder if the cats inside
are getting a laugh at the sight of you
pulling on your skirt or
scraping your hair down around your ears.
So you move on,
holding on
to that image of you
reflected for everyone to see
inside.

Inside of me
I had a picture
my whole life --
looked a lot like this
until I learned that people
could be mirrors.
Until I saw my own reflection
in the faces of strangers
as cold and alien as those
giant structures
downtown.

(Train sounds rise.)

Have you ever seen a train derail?
Ever been on the platform for too damn long
and then there's folks walking
single-file
along the glow-in-the-dark line

crying?

I was cruising through a summertime,
responsibilities on the line
loved a girl who could make you
stand

whenever she entered the room.
Her parents invited me out to dinner.
Man, I felt like such a winner --
winning smile, winning charm,
and this girl on my arm.
I went as I was
I strutted up to the door
wondering if there's ever been
a cat as cool as me:
confident,
assured --
just me.
Then she opened the door.
Evening summer light warmed even more
as it molded to her body
and the red dress she wore.

Imagine:
the
most
beautiful
red dress
you've ever seen.
Then.
The
most beautiful
woman
you've
ever
imagined
wearing it.
Call her what you want
call her a he
but tonight
she
was with me.
But it seemed it wasn't
casual night
at the country club
this time.
I dropped my forks
I spilled my wine
I felt a mask
crust over me.
I'm too ugly
I'm too queer
to be with this red woman.
I couldn't laugh

I couldn't speak
 I could only see
 the way the room looked at me
 when we walked inside.
 Sure it was the clothes,
 but wasn't that my expression?
 Wasn't my hair
 and what I'd thought to wear
 the image of my
 self
 projected
 for everyone to see?
 She took me home
 wouldn't let me walk alone.
 The kiss goodnight
 became a
 spend the night
 invitation.
 Once in my room
 she looked at me
 said I hadn't been the gregarious girl
 she'd known me to be
 though I was
 at least
 the perfect nervous boyfriend.
 I lowered my eyes
 found the strength to let myself cry
 told her everything:
 the mask, the thoughts I hear inside my head
 that I pretend come from others when faced with
 me and her,
 the woman in red.
 I said that
 in the context of what others see
 regardless of her love for me
 I saw myself
 a woman
 in burlesque
 not the boy
 I want to be
 (explosive)
 Why the roles?
 Why the box?
 Didn't butch/femme crash
 in a fiery wreck
 twenty years ago
 with all the rest
 that wasn't
 mainstream, middleclass schrek?
 I thought of the vision that came to visit me
 that one late morning
 dreaming of my mustachioed face

in the mirror.
 Maybe
 this
 is the way it's supposed to be.
 Sometimes I like to pretend I'm the ghost
 of some fifties bull-dyke butch
 reborn in too feminine a body
 in a time too streamlined by what's correct
 to live to be what I'd like to reflect.
 "Sweetheart,"
 she said,
 and oh, how she put her hands on me
 lowered her hot thighs onto mine,
 "Baby, you're boy enough for me
 but I wouldn't be with you
 if I didn't know just how much of a
 woman
 you really can be."

SCENE IV

(Train sounds rise again. The BABY
 BUTCH/BOY-DYKE hits play on the boombox
 again and listens reflectively for a moment to "Baby I'm
 a Star" by Three Finger Cowboy.)

Nobody really knows me
 not so far
 How could you ever own me
 Baby I'm a star
 How could you hope to hold me?
 Baby I'm a star, yeah I'm a star.
 I give you everything
 so why can't you be happy for me?
 How could you ever own me?
 Baby I'm a star
 How could you hope to hold me?
 Baby I'm a star, yeah I'm a star...

(He pulls a compact mirror from the girly backpack,
 and a blue eye-liner pencil. He draws two blue tears
 coming from his left eye, and puts the compact back in
 the bag. As the music shifts from contemplative to
 rocking, BABY BUTCH/BOY-DYKE jumps up
 from his seat, grabs the briefcase, and opens it.)

(rock out)
 ...How could you hope to hold me?
 Baby I'm a star
 How could you ever own me?
 Baby I'm a star
 Nobody really knows me
 Baby I'm a star
 Yeah I'm a star
 I'm a star
 I'm a star

(He pulls out blue pants, a blue shirt, and studded
 belt. He takes off his costume, and puts these clothes on
 to become THE BLUE BOY by the end of the song.)

THE BLUE BOY: The first time I rode the F to
 Brooklyn
 I thought the tunnel was lined with mirrors.
 Sitting, staring out the dark windows
 as we trundled underground toward the river,
 just around 2nd Avenue,
 a string of faces cruised by,
 first fast like a disco
 then slow enough to make out eyes,
 the nuances of smiles.
 I thought I saw my face
 reflected back at me.
 Then it lurched forward
 and forked away
 south, toward Grand Street.
 I thought,
 could that person whose train hooked a right
 have been the boy I left behind in childhood
 the guy I never thought I could be
 the face in the dream that never said a word
 but thought so hard at me
 and opened my genderswollen eyes?
 The next time I rode the train to Brooklyn
 I turned my back to the aisle.
 I watched out the black window until we caught
 the BDQ
 again.
 I knocked on the pane,
 then pounded:
 "Hey, man! Hey!
 Where are you going?
 What do I do?
 Who are we?"
 What can I say?
 I was 2 a.m. on the full moon of a Friday --
 my fellow passengers weren't too disturbed --
 it was me against the guy whose fillings
 blasted Snoop Dogg and Patsy Cline
 on each alternate chew of his open mouth
 every time he chomped down on a pork rind.
 My guy the next train over never responded
 just caught my eye,
 flicked his gaze up and down with a furrowed
 brow
 and looked away before the turn in the tracks.
 So much for duality.
 (Train sounds return.)

SCENE V

(The BLUE BOY opens the suitcase again and pulls
 out a blue suit jacket. Sending a prayer of thanks to
 Mother Butch herself, Peggy Shaw, he slips into the
 jacket. He first hums, then belts the opening strain of
 Joni Mitchell's "Blue" as he straightens out his look.)

Sharp, isn't it?
 When I bought this suit,
 I asked the tailor
 I said,
 "Hey man, don't worry about
 offending me, but,
 do I look like a guy to you?"
 He looked me up and down,
 laughed a little
 then said,
 "Oh honey, not with those hips.
 I'd still take you out."
 Nah, no offense taken.
 It's a damn fine suit, wouldn't you say?
 I wore it one night with her,
 and I was satisfied.
 Except,
 I woke up early the next morning,
 my arm bridging the gap between the
 swell of her hips
 and the
 curve of her breasts.
 I thought,
 the world still knows
 how much of a woman I am,
 even if I'm not wearing
 "three pieces of clothing
 to match my sex."
 I thought of Paula Martineau
 and Georgia Langen:
 two dykes imprisoned
 after the death of Paula's young daughter.
 It took the jury
 seven years
 to decide that that death
 had been
 an accident.
 I wonder if Paula and Georgia
 looked any
 softer
 after all that time.
 There's a sharpness to a lesbian
 I'm not decreeing
 It's just what I've seen --
 around the eyes --
 it says

Fuck you.
 I won't fit into the box
 you created for me,
 and if I must, I will not go
 silently.
 My eyes will speak for me
 across the checkout line
 on the porch of the house
 with four kids.
 I can't stand that silence.
 It cuts me.
 Paula and Georgia had it
 but nobody sees it in me
 without denying.
 No, I am
 short-haired self-confidence
 I just ain't found the right guy
 I'm a woman
 confused
 riding the night train through the Bronx
 after all the kiosks close.
 So when I woke up that dark morning
 my girl's body pressed up against hers
 I thought
 we're in a different
 class
 me and Paula and Georgia.
 If it's not about money,
 then it's about
 passing.
 You be the judge:
 on my day in court
 would you put me away?
 Girlish tits and hips that
 still look good in a
 man's suit --
 would you put this dyke away?
*(She opens shirt to reveal the ACE bandage that binds
 her breasts flat.)*
 What about this one?
(Train sounds)
 I never thought I would say
 I am beautiful.
 I am hard-edges and tattoos
 I am fast cars and guitars
 I am hard for her when it excites us
 and so, so soft
 to her touch.
 Paula, I would write it on my body
 in sticky black letters
 on some hard wall of my body
 for you

if it would make any difference.
 If it would make them see.

SCENE VI

*(Train sounds blend into music as BLUE BOY hits
 play on the boombox and The Cure's "Boys Don't
 Cry" rises.)*

*I would say I'm sorry
 if I thought that it would change your mind
 But I know that it's too late
 I've said too much been too unkind...*

*(BLUE BOY pulls a card from the jacket pocket of
 the suit. The face of Brandon Teena is printed on it.
 He moves up the aisle of the car, showing the card to
 the other passengers, asking, "Have you seen my
 friend? Brandon Teena?" When finished, he begins to
 unwrap the bandage from his chest. He wraps it
 around his face, unwraps, binds his hands with it. He
 sings along with intermittently with the song.)*

*...I try to laugh about it
 cover it all up with lies
 I try to laugh about it
 hiding the tears in my eyes
 'cause boys don't cry
 boys don't cry
 I would break down at your feet
 and beg forgiveness, plead with you
 but I know that it's too late and
 there is nothing I can do.
 So I try to laugh about it...
 ...'cause boys don't cry...
 I would tell you that I love you
 if I thought that you would stay
 but I know that it's too late and
 you've already gone away...*

*(He opens the suitcase once again. Undressing, he
 redresses in baggy yellow shorts, an indy-band T-shirt,
 and a yellow visor to become TYLER K: boyishly
 androgynous, waiting to break expectations. S/He
 broods until the end of the song.)*

*...Misjudged your limits,
 pushed you too far,
 took you for granted,
 thought that you'd love me more
 Oh now I'd do most anything to
 get you back by my side
 but I just keep on laughing
 hiding the tears in my eyes
 'cause boys don't cry
 boys don't cry
 boys don't cry.*

TYLER K: 'Till I was eleven years old

I thought I was a boy.
 Could I have turned into this?
 Look what we do to our boys.
 Does this boy look like he's got a
 feminist consciousness,
 like he's got a thought in his head
 worth much of anything?
 Does this yellow say
 smart and
 articulate
 to you?
 Like I said,
 the controls that socialized me
 into and out of this
 are multifaceted and varied.
 It's a boy's world, right?
 We leave it to them
 and don't
 face the consequences.
 oppressive, repressed
 repressive, oppressed
 it all works the same way
 it's not about your hair
 or what you wear
 or what you got going on
 down there
 as long as we're sitting
 at the door of the law
 we're letting the folks behind
 control everything.
 Yeah, I wore that training bra
 I went through the
 decathlon of puberty
 everybody
 and his best friend's mother
 training me to me
 to be.
 It took my first
 lesbian experience
 to open my eyes
 open my mind
 and my
 body
 to the fierceness
 the pleasure
 of
 being
 a woman.
 Man, like this, I got choices.
 I can elect myself
 king of the world
 or queen for a day.

See, it's not about your hair
 or what you wear
 We are bodies in a metal tube
 hurtling down the tracks
 through time and space
 gender and race
 there is miscegenation and
 androgenization
 We are on a train
 so what are we gonna do
 to get there?
 There.
 Where the space inside
 is lived out loud,
 where social control
 goes underground
 and we can talk with our mouths full
 of who we are.
 Who am I?
 Touch me.
 What am I?
 See me.
 Where am I?
 Tell me
 without saying
 a word.

*(Train sounds rise again. TYLER K hits play one last
 time on the boombox. Amy Ray's "Mountains of
 Glory" blasts from the speakers:*

*I let my rock boy final the score
 He's got drama like a toreador
 Me and the bottle we're on the mend
 I'm tryin' to win gonna lose again
 I'm gonna miss bein' the boy
 I'm gonna miss bein' the man...*

*(TYLER K changes through the series of costumes
 s/he has worn, turning the gestures s/he has used to
 play each gender over onto themselves.)*

*...I go down to F-L-A
 sand in my shoes, I think of you
 I can't get it out, it's kinda rough
 I'm gonna miss bein' the man...
 I like the way it feels, but not enough
 I'm gonna miss bein' the boy
 I'm gonna miss bein' the man
 I said hey baby don't you need me now
 mountains of glory mountains of glory
 I said hey baby don't you wanna feel
 mountains of glory mountains of glory
 I'm gonna miss bein' the boy*

*(As the last screech of the song fades out, s/he stands,
 shrugs, and bows.)*

Writers' Festival Guests

- 1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garret
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne Rivers Siddons, Memye Curtis Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone, Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
1998 Jamaica Kincaid, Thylia Moss, Sherman Yellen
1999 Tim O'Brien, Eavan Boland, Frank Manley, Memye Curtis Tucker
2000 Joyce Carol Oates, Li-Young Lee, Jim Grimsley, Robert Earl Price
2001 John Updike, Marsha Norman, Sharon Olds, Anjail Rashida Ahmad
2002 Marilyn Nelson, Bapsi Sidhwa, Scott Russell Sanders