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XAVIER REVIEW  
P R E S S

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## Editor's Note

For this issue, with a few lovely exceptions, we stayed close to home, featuring new work by New Orleans' celebrated story-teller, Randy Bates, along with an interview by a former student who knows just what to ask. Louisiana's current Poet Laureate, Ava Haymon, is featured as well, with a spread of nine poems that demonstrate her versatility and range -- technically, emotionally, artistically. In an era of engaged and active poets laureate, Haymon has probably logged more miles and put on more performances, workshops and other events than any subsequent holder of the honor is likely to match. We present also stories from the inventive mind of Jonathan Kline, as well as the elegant, eloquent pen of Daniel Webre. Liz Rosen's powerful story was solicited after her thoughtful fan mail sparked our curiosity (not a bad idea to write to your editors). We are proud of all the poems you'll read, and glad especially for new work by Grace Bauer, Gina Ferrara, Ed Ruzicka, Louisianians all. Randolph Thomas, another poet inside, has new books of both poetry and fiction just out; his story collection, *Dispensations* won the Many Voices Project award from New Rivers Press and is a finalist for INDIEFAB book of the year. Louisiana's vigorously experimental poet-fiction writer, Skip Fox is represented here by the first chapter of his new novel, *wired to zone* (Lavender Ink), out this spring.

Meanwhile, Xavier Review Press is poised to publish a new story collection by Fatima Shaik, a writer with deep ties to both New Orleans and Xavier University, though for many years she has been a professor in New York. That book will be available by summer 2015.

Work on the next issue of *Xavier Review* is also underway. That volume will include an omnibus review of new books of poetry with local connections by poet-teacher Brad Richard, and an essay about the publication finally of a 700+ page collected volume of Frank Stanford's poems (out in April from Copper Canyon Press), and --of course -- much more.

# Xavier Review 35.1, Spring 2015

Editor's Note — v

## **Randy Bates**

Magnolia — 9

Sixty Years After — 22

By The River — 23

## **Juyanne James**

“Curiosity That Can Lead to Narrative”: An Interview with Randy  
Bates — 27

## **Ava Leavell Haymon**

Nine Poems — 45

## **Daniel Webre**

A Good Pine Box — 56

## **Kathryn Jacobs**

Shedding — 63

## **Ed Ruzicka**

Savoring Every Fibre of A Peach From the Local Market — 64

## **Michael Fulop**

The Mind of the Sun — 65

Forsythia — 66

The Summer Orchestra — 67

**Jonathan Kline**

Two Stories — 68

**Mona T. Lydon-Rochelle**

Into The Desert — 80

**Grace Bauer**

Dyslexical — 82

Seasonal Sonnet — 83

**Elizabeth Rosen**

Second Child — 84

**Randolph Thomas**

At the End of Shame — 98

The Courtyard of Song — 99

**Skip Fox**

from *wired to zone* — 100

**Gina Ferrara**

More than One Synonym — 110

Near River Road's End — 111

**Randall R. Freisinger**

*Ex Post Facto*: Rhetoric 101 — 112

**Contributors — 114**



RANDY BATES

## Magnolia

*to Samuel Mockbee*

*‘If you wanted to do anything illegal in Lauderdale County....’* Sambo lowered his voice, mimicking his father, Norman Mockbee, speaking to him in confidence long ago. *‘... you had to go through Marvin Bates.’*

Although at the time that he said this Sambo was in late middle age and at the crest of an acclaimed career as an activist architect, he nurtured a constant interest in our boyhood as fortunate white kids in the 1950s and 60s in Meridian, the seat of Lauderdale County, in eastern Mississippi. Over the years he repeated to me what his father had heard: that Marvin my stepfather stood so high with the mayor in the era before our births, that once when Marvin was coming off the DTs, the mayor posted armed guards outside Marvin’s room in the hospital where, much later, Sambo and I were born.

Mr. Mockbee spoke too of a man whose name I won’t use. To me, this man had seemed only a boring crony of Marvin’s. *‘Mr. D...,’* Sambo said, raising an eyebrow and quoting his father. *‘Mr. D was....’* He sighted down his finger and clicked his thumb forward. *‘Mr. Bates’ trigger man.’*

He clicked his thumb again, my visionary friend Sambo, now vanished from this earth like those others, but still nudging me toward them.

\*

The older I become, the more I appreciate Marvin’s generosity to me—it doesn’t matter anymore how much of it was because generosity was a fixed element of his extravagant style of living or because of his devotion to my young mother whom he married late in his life and early in mine: I was six. Concerning my slender, vibrantly white-haired stepfather, what stays with me more insistently even than his generosity is my memory of the livelihood and place of business that he created for himself, Magnolia Amusement Company—he referred to it curtly as *Magnolia*—and of the three men who,

with my mother, kept it running for a decade after he died. It's to the four of them together there in those offices that, as I grow ever older, my thoughts continually return.

I first remember Magnolia when it stood on a corner near the eastern end of Front Street across from the train depot. Opaque glass bricks extended up the face of the plain, low building—from the sidewalk to the tops of the two large windows that, on the inside, framed a view of Front Street and the depot. I thought these bricks were elegant, and I still look twice whenever I see similar ones as part of any kind of structure.

Around to the side of the building there was a stark commercial garage entrance.

Into this, Wallace Sims\*, the energetic, brown-skin man who maintained Magnolia's equipment, pulled his big pick-up loaded with malfunctioning pinball and music machines. He may have repaired the illegal slots there too—I don't remember anything specific about that, but I easily recall the utility rooms that opened into the grimy enclosure in which Wallace sometimes left the truck at night. A generation of junk coated in cobwebs and dust cluttered these spaces. Wallace shoved the debris back from a lighted sequence of table tops where he did his work. The tables stood near an old sofa he sometimes napped on.

Enclosed and partially lit nearby was a padlocked exterior closet whose walls were framed chain-link. There, Lee Elvin Curtis\* kept a vast assortment of 45 rpm records that he amassed for stocking Magnolia's juke boxes, which were stationed in joints around the county. This trove of music included tunes he retired from the machines when collecting *the silver*, masses of coins that, after using his key, he poured from internal tin boxes into heavy cloth sacks. When Lee Elvin was at Magnolia rummaging in his archives, from almost anywhere in the back it was possible to see his large silhouette within the chain link, his dark complexion darker in the faint light, his non-committal eyes peering from beneath his cocked short hat brim at whatever engaged his hands.

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\* I have changed three names.

A person conventionally entering Magnolia saw none of this and walked through the front door into a large room floored in milky-dull pine boards. The spaciousness to the right seemed faintly social: The only wall ornament, a rack of antlers, hung above a miscellany of old chairs, a vinyl couch, and a space heater large as an armoire. The room smelled lived in but not domestic, with its scents of the heater, of the rarely-mopped floor, of the metallic clutter beyond one of the two doors in the back wall—and of something less tangible: that men, all to some degree racist, gathered there at odd hours to drink, smoke, palaver, and sometimes to sleep it off.

The main office was to the left, in less of the room: two desks and some cabinets behind a waist-high partition fitted with a swinging gate. The larger desk was my mother's; behind it, she was brisk and decisive, her pert looks and acute competence attractive when not intimidating to men and women alike. Her fingers a blur, she typed and ran the adding machine; and writing brusquely in a clear, graceful hand, she kept the books. I still use the heavy steel stapler, an implement older than I am, that stayed on her desk.

The other desk was reserved for Nick Abraham,\* a small Middle-Eastern man who went back further with Marvin than did anyone in Meridian. Nick had no official connection to Magnolia. His desk rarely had more on it than a phone, an ash tray, and the few pages of *The Meridian Star*. Its drawers, though, were crammed with cryptic jotting on sheets and scraps of paper, his system of keeping track of the bets that he booked. Occasionally Mr. D\_\_\_ was there too. If Nick were absent, he might spread out at Nick's desk as if it were office space of his own. But my mother had no use for Mr. D\_\_\_, and after Marvin died he stopped coming around.

One of the two doors in the far wall beyond these desks opened into Marvin's private office. This room was sparsely furnished with his bare desk, his sofa, and an ice box that held cold water and a chilled glass for his Seagram's VO. The door next to this one led into the dark spaces of the back through a passageway that included another ice box with an identical purpose.

I have no memory of Marvin himself being physically in Magnolia. Only of my mother and the three other men: she and Nick engaged in their separate

work at their desks, smoke curling from their filled ash trays. They talked and joked intermittently, giving what they said only part of their attention—as Wallace and Lee Elvin came and went, spoke to them in passing, and continued on their way to the back or to one of the honkytonks, mostly in the county, with which Magnolia did business. These were their patterns in the few years that followed her and Marvin’s marriage—years when Marvin was too sick to do much more than stay home in the new house he had bought for the three of us—and in her ten years more of running Magnolia, following his death.

Magnolia relocated not long after he died and although the new site was smaller and cheaper, it was a lot like that first one. A few blocks to the west, it stood on the other side—the south side—of the railroad tracks that paralleled Front Street, its small storefront entrance crowded by and in the diagonal shadow of the 22nd Avenue overpass. The four lanes of this thoroughfare arced above the tracks. To the north the lanes entered Meridian’s central business district; to the south what had been 22nd Avenue contracted to become the two lanes of Highway 45, which zigzagged to Mobile, 134 miles away on the Alabama Gulf coast. Magnolia’s last address was like its previous one in that there was a presence of trains, two desks in the front, dark spaces toward the back for the machines and old records, and an ice box and hard sofas on which Wallace, Nick, and possibly Lee Elvin and others dozed on weekends and at nighttime, when my mother wasn’t there.

Of these three men, Nick was much the oldest, almost Marvin’s age, soft-spoken, avuncular. Even in my earliest dim recall of Nick, I sensed that he was exceptionally kind and that he carried a debilitating sadness he tried not to display. He was an easy mark for the many solicitors who opened Magnolia’s door, and later when I was in school and encouraged to sell merchandise for class enterprises, he became my ready mark too. The look of his dark olive skin fascinated me. I couldn’t have said what he was, though I knew he wasn’t colored. Balding made plain the swarthy crown of his head, while black hair curled at the collars of his sport shirts and sprouted from his ears and the backs of his fingers. Although he smelled of having shaved every morning, his short jaw would darken by evening. As Marvin had, he wore complicated garters that kept his thin socks taut and in

hot months seersucker slacks and dressy two-tone shoes that were braided for ventilation. In every season he covered his head out of doors with one of his slope-brimmed fedoras; these he removed whenever he stepped inside Magnolia. *Honey* was his reference for my mother—spoken in a protective, platonic way that made me feel comfort in it too. I understood that he had a wife and that she was ill. I understood too—how do children know such? how do they not?—that he was loyal to her, just as he was loyal to Magnolia and my mother. As I grew through my teens in Meridian, I became increasingly conscious of my mother’s loyalty to Nick also, and eventually I realized it was an extension of her loyalty to Marvin.

That loyalty extended to Wallace, but her innocent fondness for him too went beyond that. At home she spoke of Wallace more than she did of Lee Elvin and even of Nick, invariably to praise him. She seemed to believe Wallace could fix anything. We were fortunate that, on top of the time he put into the machines at Magnolia, he spent many hours as a handyman at our house; it was pleasant to be around his cheerful, can-do attitude. His high energy and efficiency were greater than what I was used to in Meridian even though, like me, he had been born there, and I was aware that he had spent parts of his life in other places—Wallace, a medium-to-heavyset man with a sharp nose, neat moustache, and closely cropped hair. In all seasons he wore banlon polo shirts with his slacks, and I knew that he lived with his elderly mother. During the early 1960s he put on weight, much of it around his middle. In my last memories of him, he was still usually in motion, but with a recent gut that stretched his banlon and lapped over his belt.

My mother also often spoke of Wallace’s service in the Army. She said he had charge of a squad of men in combat—I assume in Korea. Her reiteration of this circumstance seemed less about Wallace’s valor than about his intelligence. Each time the subject came up she said things that implied Wallace had commanded white men in his squad, and she asserted the word “*smart!*” in relation to his achieving that kind of leadership. At the time I didn’t see the sad myopic symmetry between her over praise of Wallace and her hostility in the late 1950s and in the ‘60s toward Martin Luther King, Jr. She saw none either, but regardless she never had reason to regret her

unqualified trust in Wallace.

Her opinion of Lee Elvin was different. She associated him with Mr. D\_\_\_, who had some amusement machines of his own and for whom Lee Elvin worked too. Mr. D\_\_\_ was one of several friends of Marvin's she believed had taken advantage of him in business dealings and high-stakes poker hands during the late stages of his sickness and delusion. When Mr. D\_\_\_ came to her after Marvin's death with various debts of honor Marvin had signed, out of respect for Marvin she managed to pull together the money to pay them, but her confidence in Lee Elvin didn't survive his association with Marvin's creditor. It probably didn't help that Lee Elvin was reserved, not a person who smiled easily, the eyes in his round, dark face ever watchful though bold. Yet when Marvin was alive and I was a young boy, she trusted Lee Elvin well enough to have me ride with him down highway 45 all the way to Mobile. I was to visit her mother's aunt and uncle, who were like grandparents to me, and Lee Elvin had plans that I think involved attending exhibition baseball games in which Hank Aaron would appear, Aaron having formed the foundations of his great career on Negro diamonds in and around Mobile, his hometown.

Possibly because Marvin drove a Cadillac, Lee Elvin's car was a cut below that—but not much; his was the same make as Nick's. It felt novel to ride for two and a half hours in a shiny black Buick in the care of a somber, large, colored man who spoke with me solicitously and let me air childish opinions that I'm relieved I've forgotten. I imagine I talked on and on as we passed through the small towns that marked stages for me in the interminable, holiday journeys I often made with my mother: Quitman, Shubuta, Waynesboro, Buckatunna, finally Citronelle, then Eight Mile and, Mobile's depressed outskirts, Pritchard—where I'd later learn that Aaron played most often. I've no memory of riding back from Mobile with Lee Elvin—that return probably was one of the pleasurable times when under the eye of a kindly conductor I rode the train alone with my name and destination pinned to my shirt—but I remember Lee Elvin giving me countless 45s that he had removed from Magnolia's machines and that we often talked about this music.

Although I've heard Lee Elvin's voice since then, the sound of it hasn't

stayed with me. That may be because he spoke low and guardedly to the point of seeming muffled, rarely venturing more than a conversation obliged him to say. I still see him though—for instance, standing in the darkened back area of Magnolia’s second location, thumbing through handfuls of small records that he held near the front of his silk shirt like playing cards. Occasionally he paused and extended one to me between two fingers, then fanned further and extended another, the labels (Specialty, Excello, Dax, Checker, Chess) and their colors (yellow/white, different oranges, indigo, maroon) indelible. The singers (Little Junior Parker, Chuck Willis, Carol Fran, Johnny Ace, Slim Harpo) were the freshest of voices when I spun them on the small turntable in my room at home.

Despite his reserve, Lee Elvin spun them too. On Saturday nights for some years, he had a music program on one of Meridian’s few radio stations and announced himself as *Lee Curtis, the House Rocker*. When I was riding in friends’ cars in my teens and the House Rocker’s program came on, they turned the radio dial to something else, but on Saturdays when I was at home, I drifted into sleep to Lee Elvin’s then-familiar near mumble and to music he later gave me.

Some years ago during one of the times—for funerals, the occasional reunion, in haunted curiosity—when with increasing frequency I’ve been drawn back to my birthplace, it occurred to me that I could look up Lee Elvin’s address in the phone book. In my youth, I never knew where he lived. The address took me to 10th Avenue on the eastern margin of town, a street that, to my knowledge of it, had always been populated entirely by black people. That day, I saw blocks that were blighted in places by neglect and debris. Trees and other greenery grew plentifully though, and many of the small lots were planted idiosyncratically with vegetable gardens and flowers. Foot traffic on the avenue and particularly on the side streets, some of them unpaved and lane-like, added to the aura of a village. By then African Americans populated parts of town that I remembered as segregated—including 36th Street, and the house that Marvin bought there for the three of us after his marriage to my mother—but 10th Avenue had the look of poor neighborhoods I remembered

from earlier in the last century, and I saw no faces like mine there.

Unlike the small frame houses of most of his neighbors, Lee Elvin's had a brick veneer front that I imagined my mother would have thought tacky. The house looked comfortable though, with an unfenced front yard on which he had parked a late-model Buick, and a cement front porch that faced east and must have been a nice shady place to sit as the light changed in the evenings. Rather than knock on his door unannounced, I called him that night. He agreed to meet me the next day on Front Street.

Though a man of some size stepped toward me on the sidewalk, he was thinner than I remembered. His clothes were like ones he'd worn before—stylish slacks and silk sport shirt, new shoes, and a short-brimmed straw hat—but gravity had done some of its work on his round features. Where his complexion was darkest—in the sagging half-circles under his eyes—his skin was lined minutely with tissuey creases. He still didn't exactly smile, but when he came close to doing that, this skin creased further. Judging by the creases, it seemed to please him that I recently had published a book. Without much having to be said about it, we shared the understanding that eventually I would write something about Meridian and he would ride with me, point out places around town, and speak of whatever might help. We left his spacious Buick parked in the intense heat near the train depot and set out in my little Japanese truck.

Although Lee Elvin seemed open to anything I brought up, he usually said the minimum that was necessary and spoke without emotion. Even so, I was reassured that he was interested in what we were doing when he had me stop at a gas station so he could use the pay phone. The call was to his girlfriend, Shantell, and he put me on the line to say hello. At first I wondered if this might have been to demonstrate that he wasn't up to something a girlfriend might question, but I found myself listening to a lively-voiced woman with a welcoming style of speech. She told me he had been eager to see me because he had watched me grow up. After the call his manner remained muted, but he seemed to have as much patience as I did for surveying Meridian and talking about people he had known.

*You had to like him*, he said as we rode through depressed commercial

areas on the western side of town. This compelling influence on others, he implied, had eased my stepfather Marvin's move from the job of cotton sampler (an inspector/classifier of the quality cotton bales), which had brought him to Meridian, into a numbers operation and then the amusement business. I knew Marvin had come to Mississippi from his native northern Alabama not long after he returned from the First World War, but I'd heard nothing of cotton sampling and numbers. It was evident that Lee Elvin was working for Marvin by the time of the numbers for he spoke technically about Black Cat *policy* cards and payoff drawings that were held in a pool room on 5th Street. While speaking of the numbers, he mentioned the name of a Meridian politician who later became mayor. It was apparently during the late 1920s that Marvin grew friendly with this prominent man who, starting in the '30s, profited with Marvin from a hands-off policing policy toward what took place around the county in the increasing number of juke joints in which the young Magnolia Amusement Company had begun its operations.

In the early days, Lee Elvin told me, a numbers partner of Marvin's was killed in Memphis. He disavowed knowing whether the killing required retaliation, but he did say that Marvin took the death hard. Did Marvin ever use the concealed .38 he invariably carried, I wanted to know, use it for self-defense or in any other way? Lee Elvin denied that he ever did, but he believed he would have if he'd had to. And what of Mr. D\_\_\_?

I was more insistent about him, a slight pale man who probably spent more time with Lee Elvin than Marvin did and who, I years previously had learned, eventually died in a car wreck. Did Mr. D\_\_\_ ever pull a trigger for Marvin? I can't remember Lee Elvin's exact reply, just that it was hard to follow and that he almost smiled, seeming to think it would have been comic if Mr. D\_\_\_ had ever tried to handle a pistol.

We were riding on a long, shaded road in the Rose Hill sector of town, and the subject changed as he pointed to a boarded-up one-story building that stood overgrown with vines in a graveled lot that was returning to the woods around it. This was Bucky's, a place I had wanted to see; I slowed as we passed it. Lee Elvin spoke of a woman named Bucky Mae who ran this

club with her husband and, after he died, with her two grown daughters. I was already aware that Bucky's had been one of Magnolia's spiciest locations, and I had the idea that Bucky and her daughters were black, but Lee Elvin said no. He could go in there to collect from and service the machines, and even have a drink while he did, but Bucky's was a *hand-in-the-window* operation—meaning, he explained, that colored people could contribute there to the profits from illegal liquor sold in a dry county; but to do it, most, though not himself, had to buy through a window slat around back and not drink under the same roof as the whites inside.

The road turned into a residential avenue that took us back into more populous parts of town. We spoke of Nick as we wound through tired neighborhoods and commercial clusters in southwestern Meridian. He had me turn at an deserted playground, turn again, then park on the sweltering street in front of a shack-like building. Though this small structure had the look of having stood there since before I was born, it was one I'd never noticed when I lived in Meridian. Faded letters on a strip of tin above the padlocked door identified it as *The 27th Avenue Sandwich Shop*. He unlocked the door and led me inside. A counter and several tables with chairs around them crowded the front room—lunches had been served there earlier in the day. I gathered that Shantell was in charge of the kitchen and that Lee Elvin owned or leased the property. After he turned on the AC unit mounted in the wall near the ceiling, then the TV mounted next to it, he offered me a drink. Because I would soon be driving back to where I live in New Orleans, I hesitated. But, after he stepped behind the counter and, in an assured way that reminded me of Marvin, brought out short chilled water glasses, cold water, and a pint of VO, I accepted. Although that was a whiskey I had never drunk, its familiar smell made it easy for me to guess correctly how it would taste. As we took appraising first swallows, I sensed that after lunch the sandwich shop was a private spot he sometimes withdrew to during his rounds about town and that it also served as site of neighborhood gatherings in the evenings.

*Johnny Quick*, he said, resuming our conversation about Nick. *He told me a boy name Johnny Quick was the one started him. A boy close to his age but older. On that playground we just passed.... No, I didn't know him then.*

From when I was a child I understood that Nick's health was precarious, though he was unlikely to have complained of it. I always assumed he suffered from drinking—as Marvin did, abusing even the squat bottles of paregoric, a potent medicine intended to settle the stomach, bottles that I saw in our house on 36th Street and at Magnolia. I was surprised to learn that Nick's preferred drug was morphine and that he had become addicted to it in youth on an ordinary dirt playground—on 14th Street and 25th Avenue—in a plain part of town. A Braves game proceeded on the screen above us with the sound already low as Lee Elvin described Nick wilting at Magnolia in the static afternoons and coming into the back to medicate himself—*Sperm him up like he'd been born again.*—then napping on one of the sofas. Though he answered my questions about this, what he said showed nothing further of how it had been.

We sat for a while not speaking into the murmur of the game. I mentioned Wallace, wondering about Lee Elvin's impressions of the man my mother thought so resourceful a worker and so admirable a soldier. As when we spoke of Mr. D\_\_\_, he almost smiled. Nothing else in his expression suggested he took pleasure in being critical of a friend, yet neither was he able to let stand the idealized notion I had from my mother. As far as he knew—and he spoke in a way that made it clear such a thing was unlikely to have happened beyond his knowledge—*Wallace wasn't in no war.* What he had seen for himself was that Wallace was a worrier, a person who chose to live with his mother rather than confront life on his own; and Wallace had grown increasingly dependent on drink during Magnolia's final years and in a few that followed. Lee Elvin sipped deliberately from his glass and spoke of Wallace spending weekends on the streets of their neighborhoods swilling openly from bottles until he passed out where he happened to fall. Even though Lee Elvin's tone expressed sympathy, his seemingly involuntary head shake and the waggle of his hat brim showed he couldn't abide such public display and lack of control. He said Wallace had grown obese by the time of the fatal seizure he suffered. I thought of Wallace's thickening girth as Magnolia's operation dwindled.

Sunlight slanted through the small, high windows of the shop and drew shine from the amber mix in our glasses. A shaft had lengthened across Lee

Elvin's dark hand and forearm by the time my drink, and probably my social nervousness in the situation, obliged me to step into the short passageway between the two rooms of the building and enter a sheet-rocked space that held the toilet. While hearing myself pee and the faint sounds of the ballgame, I thought of my effortless access to this restroom in his place of business and of the sign that had once decreed he was never to assume use of such a facility of mine—even though he could clean it. I remember thinking in those moments and afterwards that, though ever more of us will grow oblivious to such distinctions or happily not know of them, people of my generation and history—whites not so much less than blacks—will never entirely forget that it wasn't always so and that the memory will be liable at any moment bizarrely to visit us.

He was vacantly eying the game when I sat back down at the table, his gold short shirtsleeve now giving back some of the light that he sat in. Earlier he had told me he had relatives in California whom he visited, and now I asked him if he had ever considered moving away from Meridian. *No*, he said, *it's my home*. When I shifted the subject to the summer of 1964 and Meridian's most infamous local event, it became evident that he knew little more about it than anyone might learn from reading, as I had. He did tell me the name of a black pimp who had informed the Klan on the day-to-day movements and courageous voting rights activities of Michael Schwerner, but he had no idea of the informant's whereabouts now. He knew that an older brother of Wayne Roberts had been a Meridian policeman, but I knew this too; Wayne Roberts was a Meridian man who had killed Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, James Chaney having been killed by a different Klansman from nearby Philadelphia. Lee Elvin wasn't personally acquainted with any of the Roberts brothers, but he talked without encouragement about an officer named Kelly who had been friendly to him and offered to help him become Meridian's first black cop. Another small headshake demonstrated his lack of eagerness to be that. He almost smiled when, lowering his voice, he added that though he and Kelly liked each other, Kelly wouldn't have liked *it* if he had wanted to go out with a white girl. The near playful tone in which he said this continued as he told me about getting his radio license in

Mobile and that a man named Eddie Holliday had hired him to do a show on a Meridian station. The House Rocker was born, he said, because the FCC wanted more blacks on the air.

After we parted that day I continued to think of him and of other things I would've liked to have talked with him about. A belated feeling that I had about him had begun to grow. I could still only imagine Magnolia in its early years. A vision of its last ones, based partially on my own observation, became clearer to me though, and I continue to see the four of them—Wallace and Nick coming in early, then my mother, then Lee Elvin strolling in past mid-day—doing their small jobs in the dingy office and work rooms beneath the overpass. There, too old not to have accepted what their lives had become and each other, they put in the time necessary to squeeze livings from a dying enterprise that by then was largely legal.

My mother's often lonely life following Magnolia I knew about, but I wondered about Wallace's and Nick's. What were their days like after Magnolia closed and she returned to Mobile, the city of her birth? Most of all—this question came to me soon after my visit with Lee Elvin—how had it been the last day they were all in the office together, how had they parted? I remember her telling me in Mobile not so long afterwards that Nick and then Wallace had died. But I knew nothing beyond that. Did she say more about it that I've forgotten? Was I incurious?

Still wondering about them and about Lee Elvin, I called him when I was in Meridian the following year. His number was no longer in service. No one answered the door at his house. There was no sign of occupancy, no Buick in the yard; the grass was high. On 27th Avenue, the sandwich shop looked to have been closed for longer than that day. The feeling that had grown in me since we sat in that small establishment, out of the heat, began in my memory of his face. A ray of descending sunlight had reached his cheek and seemed to reveal a new irony in his steady eyes and near smile. In those moments, with the game continuing above us, I began to experience the conviction, without quite knowing it at the time, that, if there had been such a person as *Mr. Bates' trigger man*, I was looking at him.

## Sixty Years After

A memory stands at the center of all that I want to say about my mother.

We're in her bed late in the night in the darkened blue house my stepfather bought for the three of us. He's not there. I don't know if he has already died; that happened when I was eight; in this memory I feel younger than eight. Not young enough though to be oblivious of death. In the memory, death is my problem. Possibly I've been startled from a dream and in its spell come from my bedroom into hers. I'm hysterical, beyond comfort.

*What if you die? How can I be without her? Are you going to die?*

She could not have answered more gently.

*Yes. But not for a long, long time.*

Long time isn't enough for me. The thought of our ever not being together is intolerable. I'm sure I wept and wailed, in a rage to leap out of my body and my mind.

Finally, failing to soothe me with shushing murmurs and strokes of my hair, she speaks of God—she who almost never did that, who kept a strict distance from sanctimonious churchgoers in the town where we lived, a person, flawed like any other, from whom, as I grew, I found reasons to keep distance of my own.

Preposterous, she speaks to me.

*God wouldn't let people be close as we are, then forever be apart.*

We whisper for a while longer into the bed clothes around our faces before, grateful in a way I can still summon, I sleep.

## By The River

**June 20, 1991**

A temperate Thursday. Like a bright New Orleans afternoon in spring, high pressure and summer's wet heat briefly forestalled, the sun mild, slanted west, beginning its arc down beyond the river. The three of us rise from a table cluttered with emptied gumbo bowls and sandwich plates in a restaurant near Jackson Square: Alvin Phillips, who has been away for sixteen years, now recently released from the Louisiana State Penitentiary upriver at Angola; his sister Gloria Sorina, who has rarely been anywhere beyond her neighborhood; and I, an obscure white writer who, not long before, completed a book about their father and family—original residents in the 1940's of the St. Bernard Housing Development, where Gloria still lives among younger generations of her relatives.

*Who's holdin'?* Alvin teases. *You holdin', Sis?*

She pats his arm to shush him, and I slip bills under a water glass before we exit through a French-window into the next part of our small impromptu celebration. We hover at his elbows as she maneuvers him among streams of visitors and locals along the square, across teeming Decatur Street, and up concrete stairs that ascend the levee. There, by a paved walkway we settle back on a bench downriver and breathe the scent of coffee beans from the wharves. Breeze from across the water ruffles our shirt collars and hair, and gulls appear to levitate just above us. Gloria keeps contact with her brother, *pettin' him*, she calls it, one hand on his bare forearm, her other arm around his shoulders. Intermittently he grinds his teeth, a protracted sound, startling in its volume, like cracking nuts. Out under the wide sky by the river, he scarcely moves, and the grinding gradually subsides. The tattooed brown skin beneath his sister's palm shines with scars where he methodically cut himself years before. *Yeh, it's nice . . .*, he murmurs to her soothing comments on the day and on where we are. *Yeh, nice.* He squints at the water's sheen,

his sagging soft features otherwise still, his eyes showing no trace of when he poured laundry bleach into them, the scar tissue in his brows above, a sign of something else.

The moment expands and it could be much later when the sight of someone approaching on the walk causes me to sit forward, stare, then stand: a handsome Italian with Asian eyes, a big jaw, middle-aged but with youth still in his step, open shirt free at his waist. Apparently just off from a job, he swings along the levee, in sync with the day.

*Please.* I hardly know what I'm saying or that I've blocked his path. *Here's someone you know.*

He stops, about to frown, before his look follows the sweep of my hand toward the man and woman on the bench. In the pause that follows, Alvin extricates himself from his sister and slowly rises, his voice strangled. *Tony...?*

Tony Licata answers in the same strangled way. *Alvin...? It's you?*

Neither knows what to say, but they move easily into an embrace that leaves Tony's palms on Alvin's temples, almost covering his ears, and Alvin's right arm around Tony's torso, his left hand patting the taller man high on his chest.

*Thought you was dead.*

*You too; heard you died in there.*

Gloria clarifies—*No, no! No dead people here. He's out now; come home to us; he's out!*

Off to the side I marvel at this chance encounter of two of the city's greatest prize fighters.

Unaware of who they are, other citizens walking the levee step around them or brush past, and some of what I know of them rushes to mind: Their growing up together in gyms; Alvin at first schooling Tony; then in '72 and '73, bad years in New Orleans for strife about color, their sold-out fights for a promotional notion, *The Middleweight Championship of the South*. How in the first fight at the Auditorium, the crowd stood through the last several rounds, and Alvin, older and already on his way down, decisively beat Tony who was young, photogenic, undefeated, and who was given a draw. How, in the rematch at the Rivergate, which left the thousands who saw it wrung out and

spent, Tony decisioned Alvin and could have knocked him out if he'd wanted to, at a time in which Alvin had begun to develop a habit that later led to his being convicted of buying heroin from an undercover agent and sentenced to prison for the rest of his natural life. How in 1975 Tony challenged for the world middleweight title and, because of his toughness and heart, suffered a fearsome beating from one of the most formidable middleweight champions in the history of the sport. How, meanwhile, Alvin was being moved on to Angola and the cuttings, the bleach, the Thorazine, the Prolixen, and the years of illegal lockdown in solitary before the years in population.

Words have slight place in what's between them, so as Tony shifts to move away, having paused there no more than perhaps a minute, it's pure parting—no *Keep in touch* or *See you later*. Except that Tony turns and points at Alvin. *A thousand, Al: You....*

*Yeh, Tony....*, Alvin answers, pointing back, and sits down.

As we watch Tony continue briskly on his way, I try to draw Alvin out on the astonishing coincidence. Beyond surprise, he allows it was *nice....*, *yeh....*, *nice* and says no more.

## 2015

The Rivergate Exhibition and Convention Center has been gone since 1995, its demolition designed to make way for a casino that operates at the foot of Canal Street. The St. Bernard Housing Development was demolished in 2008 as part of the city's approach to recovery and redevelopment following the flood that followed Hurricane Katrina. The Municipal Auditorium still stands, closed and moldering since the flood. In 1991, I worried that, as a result of what Alvin had been through in prison, he would be involved in trouble that would reflect badly on my book and on Leon Cannizarro, Jr., the kind judge who helped set him free. But nothing like that happened. He was trouble only for himself because he was damaged and ill and because, as a result of the drugs in his past, especially those used to control him in Angola, he wouldn't take any kind of pill or injection, including the medication prescribed for his diabetes, or go regularly to dialysis. He died of what likely would be termed natural causes in 1993, having been difficult for Gloria and

other relatives to care for but a threat to no one and a gentle presence for his grandchildren in particular. Tony died of a heart attack in 2008. His obituary disclosed that his wife had died some years before, that he was close to his daughter, and that even in recent years he talked of making a comeback in the ring. In failing health since Katrina, Gloria died on February 15, 2009. After living with relatives in New York and in Denver during the flood's long aftermath, she had returned to New Orleans, to a different neighborhood and the apartment of her youngest daughter, who loved and respected her—as did the many relatives and friends she had helped care for from childhood.

I regret I can't remember more of the afternoon by the river when Alvin and Tony last met—only that we enjoyed the breeze from across the water for a while longer before we went home.

Author's note:

*“By the River” recounts a coincidence involving four of the people in the book called Rings that I published in 1992. The coincidence happened in 1991, too late to be included in the galleys, but I wrote it down anyway. I've recently updated it in a way that I hope makes it stand on its own.*

## “Curiosity That Can Lead to Narrative”: An Interview with Randy Bates

I first met Randy Bates over fourteen years ago, as a student in one of his creative nonfiction workshops, a course he taught after the University of New Orleans hired him to develop a concentration in nonfiction there. Since then, he has mentored and generally cared about me, both as a fellow writer and friend. He helped me find my writing voice, and he also helped me navigate the lowest point in my life after my mother died, when I felt as though to live also was to grieve. He is by far one of the most understanding, compassionate people I know. I often say that he has a deep soul—the graying beard enhances this image of being so wise and enlightened. It seems highly appropriate then, that I share a recent interview with him, discussing the re-issue of his acclaimed documentary, *Rings: On the Life and Family of Collis Phillips* (Perseus Books, 2013). He and I also discussed his collection of nonfiction in progress, *Magnolia Amusement Company: Memories of Youth and Privilege in Dark Times and Bright in Mississippi*.

Randy is a talented writer and an exceptional teacher. After he received his Ph.D. in English at Tulane University, he taught at Xavier, Tulane, Loyola, and Harvard universities. He has taught at the University of New Orleans since 1999, where he teaches mostly creative nonfiction, but he has also taught poetry, fiction, and drama. He is a much sought after thesis advisor, he is the nonfiction editor of *Bayou Magazine*, and he has often been a visiting writer at other universities. He has published journal articles, interviews, and reviews, as well as nonfiction, poetry, and fiction. *Rings: On the Life and Family of a Southern Fighter* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) was first published in 1992. He also has a poetry chapbook, *Dolphin Island* (Finishing Line Press, 2011).

Interviewing this accomplished writer, friend, and mentor has been one of the highlights of my career. In discussing the book and his memoir collection, I learned even more about a man who always seems to be teaching me something about life.

JJ: I would like to start by asking why you decided to write this book about the Phillips family. I understand that Collis was like a father to you in many ways, but why was it so important for you to tell this particular story?

RB: When I met Collis Phillips in 1979, I was between things. I had just finished graduate school and wanted to broaden the range of what I knew. I felt drawn to the education I sensed I could find in non-academic experience, including the physical; I also was inspired by the example of a close friend in graduate school, Rick Trethewey, who had boxed professionally and also was a poet and a scholar. Since my late teens I aspired to write a novel. (I aspire to that still.) I sensed that what I observed and experienced in boxing might become material for a worthwhile novel. I soon learned that I had no future in boxing, but soon too I began to see the essence of that novel in Collis (his personality, his character, his suffering) and in what I was learning about his family. The more I learned about all of them, though, the more necessary it seemed *not* to fictionalize their hard, vivid lives but to tell about them factually.

One fact that I was hypersensitive to was that their story remain theirs and not mine to tell. But since they had not had the literate kind of good fortune that would enable them independently to tell it themselves, I gathered the true, factual story and tried to tell it absolutely as truthfully as I could, shaping opportunities for Collis's and their voices to do as much of the narrating as possible.

JJ: Yes, as readers we can feel how important it was for you to be so "hypersensitive" about telling the Phillips family's story, and that although this was a growing/learning, or even "non-academic experience," for you, you were still able to allow the Phillips their own voice. In writing the book, what did you learn about yourself, about your ability to write – nonfiction in particular?

RB: I learned I could be more patient than I realized. Also that nonfiction can be full with opportunities to be artful—that paradoxically the limitations that facts impose also can increase the likelihood of going beyond those limitations.

JJ: I see that the book received mostly critical acclaim. Was this important to you?

RB: As is true I imagine of most writers concerning their work, it was—and is—important to me that this book be read and valued. For the Phillipse and the meaning of their lives certainly. And also because I believe writing is a fine thing to do, the best thing I'm able to attempt. Previous to *Rings*, I had written about a dozen poems, two short stories, a critical article, and a dissertation I didn't enjoy.

JJ: What standards had you set for yourself early on as a writer?

RB: Drawing from that experience and whatever else I understood and had read, I set my writing standards as high as I could. A small—maybe fussy?—stylistic illustration concerns the many idioms in English that involve the word *got*. To my taste, *got* idioms lack even the subtle loveliness that English can have. Although I use those idioms probably more than I know in speaking, and although I wanted my prose to be natural, I took pains to prevent any instance of *got* and its idioms from appearing anywhere in *Rings*, other than in dialogue.

JJ: I love that example; it must have been difficult to achieve. We probably use “got,” or some version of it, quite often in conversational English. But you might also agree that not every writer has such high standards that he would be concerned about idioms and “the subtle loveliness” of certain words. I would like to get at the heart of why you feel this way.

RB: Since our primary medium as writers is words, and since each word is an opportunity for choice, it feels right to me—in prose, no less than in poetry—to give every care to the words we write. For me, this is an aesthetic opinion that extends into practical ones about usage, even grammar. I recognize that language, like everything, is perpetually changing. The writing I most admire, though, actively aims to achieve—especially without seeming to—the beauty and precision that words can have when they're carefully chosen or actively received rather than accepted with little intuition or thought. Such language resists as much as it can the tide whose nature is to wash it away.

JJ: Thank you. Are you as conscious, when writing nonfiction, of making your work as literarily relevant as possible? I notice and enjoy the figurative quality of the title, *Rings*, for example, which has a symbolic element that

works on so many levels.

RB: I think I'm always in some way aware of resonances, but I'm less conscious of them when drafting and more so when revising.

JJ: Now that the re-issue of the book is available, what did you feel needed to be changed? Had there been things you wanted to redress since the book was first published?

RB: I'm happy that it was possible in the re-issue to include a genealogy, which the original needed. Since the book didn't end with Collis's death, although that's where I stopped it, I'm also glad there could be an Afterword, which doesn't end it either but which further follows the lives of other key people in its pages.

JJ: Who was your audience for the book, initially—who did you imagine your reader would be?

RB: I imagined myself writing for an audience of literate strangers—and my loved ones.

JJ: When I read the book, I don't see it as a "sports" or "boxing" story, but rather a very human story about the Phillips family, the head of whom was very important to your own life—as a boxer, a friend, and subsequently as the subject of your book. Would you agree with this?

RB: Yes. I think *Rings* is essentially about human relations.

JJ: How much effort went into portraying the black vernacular as you wrote the book, and now as you write a collective memoir?

RB: I'm grateful that you asked this. Collis's talk was one of the things that most made me want to write about him. I don't think I'm idealizing when I say that his locutions were often beautiful. They sometimes even included snatches of what I'd call found poetry. I felt that was often true too of the speech of others in his family—for instance, his daughter Gloria and even and especially his son Alvin when near deranged in prison. I've read prose-writing guides that counsel avoiding dialect—especially that of those who have been marginalized—in order not to come across, inevitably, as condescending. It's true that Collis and many in his family had limited formal education and shaky command of Standard English. But, though Collis was ignorant of many facets of grammar, his expression clearly wasn't ignorant of

human life, the richness within it, and its kindness and cruelties. One of the motifs in the book involves listening. I have no reservations about the pains I devoted to trying to recreate the vernacular(s) throughout, including aural spellings and the dropping of final gs. All of that effort was the opposite of ridicule. Collis's talk, like that of many others who came through what he did, was essential to his charisma and, I'd say, his glory.

JJ: I agree that Collis's "locutions were often beautiful." Interestingly, Morrison says that one of the thing(s) which identifies black writing is that it cannot simply be defined by the "dropping of gs." You aren't a black author, and yet you placed a lot of emphasis on portraying the dialect, spellings, and quality of his speech. This shows your respect and admiration for Collis by allowing him to define himself through an accurate portrayal of his vernacular language.

RB: I'm glad it came through that way for you. I hoped to show respect. And I appreciate knowing of Morrison's comment because there was so much more to Collis's way of talking than dropping gs—though there were plenty of those, and are in Caucasian speech, too. In the memoir collection I'm working on now, black voices aren't prominent and sustained to the degree that Collis's and those of members of his family are, but in this current material, I try just as hard to re-create the speech of black Mississippians. For instance, in one of these true stories, a woman who worked for my stepfather when I was a young boy reprimanded my immature behavior in this clairvoyant way: "Boy, you livin' on a bed a roses, now. But it ain' go'n last." Another woman, who was very old and sometimes looked after me, said something unforgettable to me when she and I were listening to the radio broadcast of the Louis-Marciano prizefight and I condescendingly told her, "I'm for Louis, the old champ. He's colored, you know." Her reply to that was "I reck'n I know who Joe Louis is." A sad truth is that I never knew these women's last names. But I still hear them and the voices of other black people from back then, and I frequently remember just what they said. I can't as often say the same of the white people I knew casually or even well in that time and place.

JJ: Would you agree that whether anecdotal or through epic storytelling, we are able to hold on to all those people who have now passed on? When

their language is clear, and accurately portrayed, we cannot lose it, nor them. Not to mention the ideal that writers should strive for when writing dialogue, right?

RB: Almost any writing is implicitly memorial, isn't it? I think we agree that trying to recreate someone, that person's voice and exact words in particular, often is also an effort to hold on to the person, to keep her here.

JJ: Was this the most difficult part of writing this particular book? Where else did you struggle?

RB: In pieces I'd previously written, I had an idea early of how they would end; those ideas about ending guided the rest of the writing toward those endings. From the beginning and throughout most of the ten years that it took me to bring *Rings* to some kind of provisional finish, I had no idea of an ending. This uncertainty often made me anxious. I had to learn to keep working despite that uncertainty. It was necessary to trust in the endeavor and to let the narrative threads and my re-creations of them go on seemingly at their own volition and pace. I hoped the improbable release from Angola of Collis's son Alvin might be the event that the book could close on, but Alvin's release, never certain until almost the last hour, didn't happen until 1991 after I'd already turned the book over to the publisher. Because of Collis's vitality and strength, I didn't expect him to die when he did despite his age and medical issues. His death in 1989 ended the book; writing about his last forty days in what became the final chapter made me know that. Despite all the sorrow within it, that chapter—as I've heard writers sometimes say about some of their work—seemed almost to write itself; this happened, virtually without revision, within a month. It is part of the book's sadness that Collis didn't live to see Alvin come home. For the sake of the book itself, I'm glad that "By the River," my account of a coincidence involved in that homecoming, closes the Afterword in the digital re-issue and appears in this issue of the *Xavier Review*.

JJ: Ultimately, the question of race comes up. Having grown up in the Deep South, I think you might agree that the relationships between blacks and whites continue to shape the landscape of Southern writing. How aware were you of being a white man writing about a black man and his family?

RB: Especially early on, I was acutely aware of our racial difference—Collis called it “color.” Not that I ever entirely forgot our racial difference—nor that I’m a white man and some of the negative baggage that can come with that—but as the project went on and on, our being different colors seemed to matter less and less.

JJ: Were there any “truths” or even “stereotypes” that you found yourself trying to address or avoid, or did you allow the work to speak for itself?

RB: Some stereotypes that belatedly came to my mind because a few reviewers of the book mentioned them were *tragedy without uplift* and *impoverished urban black people as victims and criminals*. Despite the poverty and crime surrounding and in their lives, I didn’t think of Collis and most of his children and grandchildren in this way because in most instances that I witnessed, I also witnessed the uplift of their strength. Particularly in portraying Collis, his daughter Gloria, Alvin, and his grandson Alvin Jr., I tried to show their astonishing toughness and vitality and their essential nobility and how those traits are more important than their inevitable flaws and contradictions as ordinary human beings. I think the Afterword to the book also makes it evident that there is worldly as well as personal success in the current generation of the family and reason to have confident hope for many of them and their children.

JJ: I agree that it would have been easy to simply portray the stereotypical themes of black life (especially in urban America), without further showing “their essential nobility” as human beings drowning in struggles. I get the impression you always believed that at some point the family would have reason to hope.

RB: All the hardships and troubles they went through sometimes made me doubt it, but in the midst of all that, the children who became the current generation—Keyon, Derrick, Derrion, William, others—knew they were truly, unconditionally loved, often by many in their large family. Such love played a role in how successful they became. I also believed the prescient pronouncement that James Baldwin made way back in 1953: *The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again*.

JJ: I get the impression you are more well-read than most writers. Is this

so? How important is it to you?

RB: There may be writers who don't read much, but I sense they're distinctly in the minority. I don't know how my reading stacks up against that of other writers generally. But here in New Orleans, for instance, I can easily name writers who I think are better read than I am. Certainly John Biguenet, who teaches at Loyola; also Tom Bonner and David Lanoue, my former colleagues at Xavier, and John Gery and several of my colleagues at UNO. The best read writer I've known is Tom Whalen, who founded the creative writing program at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, the city's celebrated arts-training high school. From working closely with Tom in that program in the 1980s, I gained an education in reading as a writer that exceeded the education in reading I experienced in graduate school. A small incident concerning one of Tom's young students at NOCCA exemplifies something I'd like to add in answering your question. When this student's father complained about the cost of all the books she was buying and studying, the student told him, "Daddy, you once paid for violin lessons for me, didn't you? Well," she continued, gesturing toward the walls of books in our classroom, "now *these* are my lessons." I think her statement points to the truths that most writers read *a lot* and that we learn from each other, our betters in particular. I believe it almost goes without saying that a love for what's in books is one of the main motivations that writers have for writing books themselves. That's how it was and is for me.

JJ: And me as well. I would not be the writer I am today had I not discovered books, and not to mention embraced the very necessary act of reading in college. Getting back to the Phillips family, could you talk a little about them and what they mean to you, as a person and as a writer. One reviewer said you wrote about your subject "compellingly and with much compassion." How difficult was it to do so?

RB: It wasn't difficult at all to write about and care for them. Throughout and following the decade in which I gathered and wrote the book, the family made me feel welcome. They included me at funerals and their family reunion. In the years since the book was first published, almost all of those I knew best in the family have died. Hurricane Katrina permanently scattered others.

Although Collis's grandson, Alvin Phillips, Jr. now lives in New York, he and I keep in touch, mostly by phone. Because of the long preparation of the book that drew us together, I felt an unusual closeness to members of the Phillips family, especially to Collis, Gloria, and now to Alvin, Jr. I live near Holt Cemetery, and periodically when I'm out running, I visit the Phillips family plot and pull weeds if that's needed.

JJ: The way you have cared about and continue to care for this family is admirable, to say the least, but I imagine that you've "caught some slack" (or been criticized) about it, either from the outside edges of this family and community, or other people in general. Is this the case?

RB: Yes, though not from the immediate family. I think sometimes from the community though. Maybe an anecdote can speak to how: Shortly after the book first came out, because of it I was invited to a literary luncheon here in New Orleans, and I was seated near a distinguished African American educator (*not* Dr. Norman Francis). This gentleman brought up *Rings* and said he hadn't yet read it himself but a friend of his had and praised it and recommended it to him. The friend he referred to was an important African American writer and New Orleans native, whom I was well aware of but had never met. Not being innocent about the potential problems of a white writer writing about a black family, I was thrilled that he apparently had found value in the book. A week or so later, I happened to run into that writer in City Park. We were both waiting with partners for a tennis court. Still buzzed from the compliment I thought had been paid to what I wrote, I greeted the writer in a friendly way. He nodded slightly and looked away. It occurred to me then that the gentleman at the luncheon may have exaggerated out of politeness, but I'll never know. I did know I'd been stung though. But that sting was okay, even if it didn't feel like it at the time. If nothing else, it reminded me I need to never forget that concerning race, except in intention, I'm on the wrong side of history.

JJ: Well, it is always difficult to write from some other race's perspective. Even as a black writer, I am measured by my treatment of my race. To me, *Rings* reads as though you were the only one to write it. The care with which you gave the subject is obvious and admirable – your point of view is diverse

enough to allow us an unobstructed view of the subject. What other concerns did you have as you researched and then wrote the book?

RB: Relatedly, early on in particular but throughout, I worried that I might be, or be perceived to be, exploiting the people in the book. Collis never looked at it that way though and, so far as I knew, neither did his immediate family. But there was an exception: I expressed that concern to Alvin near the end of one of my visits to him in Angola. He had been exploited in boxing and knew what it was to toil in a harsh public spotlight. Still, he surprised and subtly taught me when he said, “A book can’t get over without some kind of exploitation.” At the end of that visit, maybe to counter this constant concern of mine and my doubts sometimes that the book would ever be finished, he also said, “It’s too late to go back now.” His saying both of these things helped me not to give up, although I didn’t kid myself that Collis’s and my profit-sharing agreement solved any question of exploitation; and I continued to be concerned about that. And still am.

JJ: Did you discuss, or have you discussed, the profit-sharing agreement you had with Collis, or is this something just between the two of you? Why are you still concerned?

RB: Our agreement to share profits, if any, was no secret. The family was aware of it, though the agreement was between Collis and me and, as described near the end of the book’s first part, we had a legal contract. I received no money from my publisher until the first draft was complete, which didn’t happen until after Collis died. I received part of the very modest \$15,000 advance then and the rest several months later when I submitted the final revision: a total of \$12,538 after my agent took her commission. According to the 50/50 agreement between Collis and me, half of that went to him and his heirs and half to me and mine. We’d been trying for some time to appeal Alvin’s natural life sentence on a low-level drug conviction. Collis’s other sons were dead; his two daughters used a portion of their part to retain an influential lawyer to file that appeal. But what really worked for Alvin was that Leon Cannizarro, the current District Attorney in Orleans Parish, was then a judge in one of New Orleans’ criminal courts. Unlike other judges we had approached, he appreciated what deserved to be done and was willing

to do it. Having served sixteen years, Alvin was released while the book was in galleys.

Even twenty-five years ago, \$6300 wasn't much money—especially within a large family in which needs were great. I don't know how the rest of that half was spent. At a family gathering, I overheard a few complaints from members of the extended family who assumed much more money was involved. But there was no further monetary profit, and there won't be unless the book has a second life and belatedly earns back more than its small advance, which at this point it's a long way from doing. Those few family complaints, along with the apparent opinion of the writer I mentioned, who maybe didn't feel I had the right to write the book that I did, are the only slack I caught, so far as I know.

As for my continuing concern, it's that, even though, in an effort toward fairness, the book bared some very difficult personal elements of my life too, Collis and his family and their trials are so much just *out there* and through my eyes and that they received little from it beyond my admiration and maybe the admiration of the book's comparatively few readers—while I benefitted professionally from publishing a book with a well-known publisher. Without that publication, I probably wouldn't have been hired for a full-time teaching position in creative writing.

JJ: I understand the angst of not being able to do more for this family that you care so much about—this is the kind of thing that “makes men's souls weep,” as they say. But the Phillips family sounds as though they are indeed noble and strong. I doubt that they would truly begrudge you any success that came from the publication of the book. I am sure you also had the support of your family, friends, and/or peers when you told them you would be pursuing this particular subject?

RB: Definitely.

JJ: I have a few questions about you, the writer. You are obviously talented, and clearly you have a gift for telling real life stories. Are there any particular writers you credit for influencing your writing style?

RB: *The Great Gatsby* is what I consider the first real adult book that I read. Jane Emmons, my tenth grade English teacher, gave me an individual

assignment to write a book report on it. At the time, I didn't understand the book, but in a way that I loved, and as I imagine my teacher foresaw, I fell under its spell. And concerning Fitzgerald's way with his sentences and many of his details, I still feel that spell even though I'm older now than Miss Emmons ever was. Keats's poems and Chekhov's stories came a little later and are others that stay with me.

In the decade when I was writing *Rings*, I read everything that seemed pertinent: works that immediately return to mind are sociological studies by Elliott Liebow and Oscar Lewis; Baldwin's early essays; DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*; *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi*; and two whose accomplishment and even greater ambition especially inspired me at the time, Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* and James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

JJ: Was there a conscious moment when you decided you would pursue nonfiction and teach it as well?

RB: Not exactly. I teach mostly nonfiction now because following the publication of *Rings*, the University of New Orleans hired me to help develop a concentration in this genre in its MFA program.

JJ: Regarding your writing habits: do you write early or late, at a desk or anywhere, paper or computer? Are there any rituals or habits you must follow?

RB: Just whenever I can; mostly computer, but with paper for gathering notes and sometimes for working out structure or just sitting and fiddling with a passage. Because of teaching and a second family, including an active young son, I haven't had the time I'd like to develop rituals and habits. If I were entirely free to do that though, I'd probably become nocturnal and sleep during the day and write and read through the night.

JJ: Do you talk about your work before it is published?

RB: Rarely. Hemingway's "If you talk about it, you lose it" has always rung true for me.

JJ: I know that as a professor who teaches the craft of writing, there is a need to sometimes share your work. How much of your work do your students get to see?

RB: Not much. I think sharing my work regularly with my students could

become self-indulgent—as well as maybe interfere with their own individual ways of developing. Now and then (never more than once in a semester if that) I may hand out something short of mine that they can just have, evidence that I'm taking care and trying hard, as I hope they are, and that isn't intended for discussion unless they initiate it outside of class.

JJ: How does being an instructor affect your work overall?

RB: On a positive note, teaching involves me more than I would be otherwise with a stimulating and informative community of writers and scholars who are committed to writing and literature. But for me, teaching springs from the same sources as my writing does; in this, it often takes time and energy from my writing. Teaching isn't the reason I haven't completed another full-length book since *Rings*, but it is a contributing factor—especially so in light of my state's declining support for public education and the arts in particular. This do-more-with-less approach makes it harder to teach well and much harder to do the research and writing that, at the university level, are expected to augment teaching.

JJ: Do you think this will improve, or will we (teachers who also write) ultimately have to find creative ways to address this issue?

RB: I wish I could be more hopeful that this short sighted drive toward privatization in public schools and universities can be redirected any time soon. Others may well find creative ways to address increasing, unremunerated workloads, but being too busy to work out a better strategy to address that, my primary way has been to sleep less. I haven't despaired though: The fact that teachers' and writers' work often is first a vocation may make it possible for many of us to outlast the influences of those who are more about, what Wordsworth called, "getting and spending."

JJ: What is your responsibility to your students?

RB: Within the shared commitment that joins us, to do my best to serve them and their work.

JJ: I have heard some writers say that they don't believe the craft of writing can be taught. What are you trying to teach your students? A larger, broader question might be, how can writing programs help writers develop their craft?

RB: I don't think that writing programs are worthwhile for every aspiring

writer. We can think of many successful writers who didn't even attend college: Orwell, Woolf, Baldwin .... But I do think writing programs, by providing a knowledgeable audience that speaks back to work in progress, can save many aspiring writers precious time in learning the necessities of process and the essentials of craft. In workshops, I've observed again and again that craft can be taught. Gabriel Garcia Marquez compared learning to write to learning to build a table; for Larry Brown, the analogy was learning to lay bricks. But creativity? Originality? Those are more elusive matters. Yet writing programs can also help aspiring writers to learn whether those deeper waters can be a medium for them.

JJ: Speaking of your memoir collection, and the essays I have read from the collection, I must say how powerful the writing is, which makes me wonder why it's taken so long for you write about your own life, especially in such a free and vulnerable way. What are your hopes for the collection, other than its success?

RB: I hope the memoir collection helps to make palpable for readers nuances of the bad old days in Mississippi, as well as of some good ones, that they may not be aware of. Within that past, there are elements that could use further healing. I hope parts of the collection can help with that.

JJ: Yes, I have that same hope, not only for your collection but for any writing that seeks to heal the lingering ills of society. From a purely gratifying perspective, I was fascinated to read about the Fruit Distribution center, to hear about Beany (and other workers, servants in your young life), and to be introduced to your past as a "privileged white Southerner." Why write this memoir now?

RB: Some of those who should know, I believe Orwell and Faulkner among them, have said that writers experience their essential material in the first two decades of life. It seems that I've thought of the material in this collection always. I would have written about it sooner if teaching, *Rings*, and other commitments hadn't taken precedence.

JJ: In a sense, all those memories have been hanging on, just waiting for you to find the time to write about those initial first two generations of your life. I often find that as I write about those first memories, they seem to

fade or dissipate somehow. Could it be now that the memories have found a home, a place where they can now be remembered with ease (through the writing), our minds somehow let go of them?

RB: For me, it would be that my mind lets go of them, and some of them may begin to fade, *after* I've written about them. Probably not till then.

JJ: It seems to me that you are writing about the deeper, darker questions of life. Even as a child, you were focused in this way. Is this a quality all writers must have? How does it inform your writing?

RB: I agree with John Hersey and many who, in one way or another, attest that love and death are *the* subjects. Not that I've had it as hard as so, so many have, but I think my temperament was shaped by my parents' parting when I was five, my stepfather's death when I was eight, and my being alone a lot as an only child. I often wish I didn't feel what's in life as keenly as I do. Most personally, my writing is a way of putting that feeling somewhere else. I experience comfort and some kind of relief when that happens.

JJ: I am excited to read more about the civil rights movement and its effect on your young life. You say, for example, that you "permanently left Meridian" after your high school graduation in 1963, the summer before three young men were murdered 30 miles away. Did this cause you to think harder about race, even more than your relationships with the servants prompted you to do?

RB: While I believe the murders of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman were beyond devastating for all concerned, I wouldn't say those crimes caused me to think any harder about race than did my intimate observation and personal experience of black people who worked for us and other white people in Meridian across the years. What I saw in these women and men who did servants' jobs ultimately shamed, humbled, and in small human ways affirmed me. This last was because I eventually realized that despite—and maybe because of—what they suffered, they were somehow able to *care* for me in both senses of the word. I guess that's the love part of Hersey's dichotomy in the previous question.

JJ: I like what Hersey says about "love and death," and agree wholeheartedly. My first collection of essays came about because of my mother's death and

my love for her—it's evident in each essay in the collection. I wanted to share this with you: speaking of memories that we eventually end up writing about, I remember going to "A" School in Meridian when I joined the U.S. Navy. I had a couple of eye-opening racial experiences there, and throughout my adult life, I've had to remember that I forgave those people years ago and that I should not still think of it in a negative way. Your having grown up there adds to my overall feelings about that place and how a place can shape who we are, as well as that ultimate essay I will write one day. I guess my question might be, do you ever (or still) feel the need to forgive people from your past, and does writing the memoir collection help "heal," as you say?

RB: I've long known about your service in the Navy, but I never knew you had such experiences in Meridian and at the Naval Air Station there. We might turn the interview around at this point as I'd like to hear you say more about those experiences and "that ultimate essay," which I'd love to read—as I surely will one day if—as Collis and Gloria would say—"God spares life." And, yes, a need for further forgiveness and healing all around motivates a lot that's in the collection.

JJ: As a brief response, I will share this: While I was in "A" School, studying to be a Yeoman in the U.S. Navy, one of the townspeople called me the "n" word, one of perhaps only a couple of times that word has been used to define me (at least to my face). On another occasion, while on a double date, our small group was denied entry to a club because, "We don't take your kind in here." As a young person, barely turned 18 years old, having just begun my service for my country, it was of course eye-opening. It would have been just as easy to have been denied because of my age, I often think—I'm not sure of the drinking age there—but that wasn't the case. The thing I had to ultimately understand (about race, about traveling to all the places I've traveled to in my life, about growing into a better person myself) is that forgiveness is a necessity in life; otherwise, we waste what valuable time we have hating and disliking people. And besides, as a writer, I have to be able to see and at least try to understand every side of human nature.

RB: It's good to learn that you also have Meridian material to write about and yet another strong piece to write. I hope you'll render it in nonfiction,

but I know you've had a lot of success in fiction too.

JJ: It is interesting that you and I have a kinship as writers from the South. Do you see yourself as a "Southern" writer?

RB: I understand both of us to be *Southern* in having been significantly shaped by where we're from and by our circumstances in segregated, non-urban places: my circumstances being those of a privileged white male raised by a single mother in a small, stratified Mississippi city and your circumstances being those of a black female raised by two parents, a very strong mother in particular, among close siblings and other relatives in the complex intimacy of a rural town in Louisiana. I know you experienced close at hand some of the initial turmoil of desegregation in your part of the South; in an earlier era, I witnessed the turbulent preliminaries to that in my part of the South.

JJ: Yes, you write from a quintessentially "Southern" time, place, and personal history. In your essay, "Help," my heart sank when the porter said Lavinia had died. I know that writing nonfiction forces writers to mentally delve into places most people dare not consider. How difficult was it to write about this particular moment in your life? What do you hope the reader gains from reading this memoir?

RB: Although I grieved and cried while writing about Lavinia Dozier, except for the perpetual struggle to find the right words, writing that work was more cathartic than difficult.

I hope the collection will help readers to experience, as I did, the mixed nature and complexity of how it was back there and back then. In wanting to include peaceable conversations with the grown children of the man convicted of the civil rights murders, I hope to add to what is understood about the, so far, silent dimension of that event and, in that way, also add to the healing.

JJ: Similarly, when I read the section, "By the River," I said, as you did in writing about the awkward meeting between the two men years later, that it is always about a moment, always. You slow down the writing just enough to show us this moment in time, mostly with description: "his sagging soft features otherwise still." But then, I think about Collis (or was it Alvin) who said about you that "you come lookin' at him with wondrous eyes." You continue to be a unique observer of life, a quality that writers must possess in

abundance. How much do you think your style of writing has changed over the years? Do you think/hope that the memoir will be your best work to date?

RB: I don't remember for sure either, but I think maybe Gloria reported that Alvin said that or something like it about when I'd visit him in Angola. I'm not sure if or how my writing has changed, but in recent years I've noticed that I sometimes make an effort to write shorter sentences. I don't know how the memoir collection will compare with previous work. I'd love to have readers who are familiar enough with all of it to make that call for themselves if they wanted to.

JJ: I would like to end by asking you about "family," a literary tradition like no other, and one which you portray so well in both *Rings* and the memoir you are writing. Do you have any universal truths that you try to punctuate when you tackle this topic? What, if anything, do you hope to say about family, ultimately?

RB: Although I've always been drawn to individual families, I don't know that I have anything ultimately to say about family. Through the phases of my youth in Mississippi, I attached myself to the large, stable families of two of my friends. From two marriages, the first one amicable, the second one current, I now have four children, four grandchildren, and a slew of relatives here in New Orleans. Maybe for me it's that families offer opportunities to exercise curiosity that can lead into narrative.

JJ: Thank you, Randy, for sharing your time and thoughts. I look forward to reading your memoir collection—as always, I wish you happiness and success.

RB: Thanks to you, Juyanne, and to the *Xavier Review* for inviting us to do this. Here's to *your* collection, soon to be in print!

## Nine Poems

### Century's Child

*for Sonja Bruzauskas*

Sonja's never seen an eclipse. *We lived  
in mountains, in Sauerland. The sky's  
cloudy all the time.* Tonight, a comet

should be visible when earth shadow reaches  
this rising full moon and the sky goes dark.  
Sonja's never seen an eclipse, and she's lived

in Berlin, Manhattan, Essen, and Nuevo Leon.  
I gesture: *Earth here ... sun ... moon*, check the thin  
clouds time after time. Tonight's comet's

*Newsweek's* "sky-event of the century."  
Hale-Bopp, first visit in four thousand years.  
Yet Sonja's never seen an eclipse. Under live oaks,

Houston avoids horizons. Sonja's Russian,  
Lithuanian, German, Swedish: Europe's canopy  
of clouds during our time. Tonight, the comet

fails to appear. We blame the leaf-choked city,  
*Newsweek*. We let the rust-cloaked moon suffice:  
Sonja sees her first eclipse. Her we love,  
the few clouds, this brief time we have tonight,  
even the absent comet.

## Divination In A Summer Of Grief

To begin, I pull my hair back, knot it  
with a scarf. This is what I see first:  
one bright star in a sky full of others,  
an owl barely visible. From two pitchers,  
water pours into a moving stream.

Next, the location of danger: a daytime sky  
explodes with clouds, rays, Cupid. A King  
waits, impatient, and a pair of bashful lovers  
who join left hands. The young woman's eyes  
close prettily. Straight as a clock hand,

Blind Cupid's arrow points toward her.  
There are more where that came from.  
What is it I invoke? Knowledge of right/wrong?  
Strength of character? These are advantages,  
surely. I am old and my joints hurt, and I

engage in numerical calculations. Cards,  
like the Newtonian Universe, correspond  
to a system of integers. My answer:  
You must go into the dark alone,  
this archaic little candle all you have

for a star. Silence is recommended,  
even celibacy. You will put on old sandals  
and a brown coat. The sky, blessedly, empty.

## Geography

i.

Alaska is every woman's resentment  
although when a telephone  
rings in my dream it is China calling  
where the shapes of mountains  
make no sense. China the white doctor,  
my greatgrandfather, a lot of provinces so  
I get them all mixed up. To abandon is Samoa,  
is missionaries again, my mother's broken ankle,  
and Rwanda in Newsweek is a grown student  
who lets off writing about flowers and grandchildren  
and brings me rivers of bodies. DWB  
calls it an old war with cholera and the killings  
with hoes and shovels, but a new war  
with panic driven by radio broadcasts  
and large migrations of the terrified.

A man can screw and walk away,  
but Alaska is the promise of a vasectomy.  
Alaska is the promise she knows is made  
to shut her up, the promise held out  
like a molester's peppermints. Alaska  
is knowing all the while, the glacier till,  
the mountains with no meaning whatsoever,  
softball in the rain because it is always raining.  
Alaska is the real word for it, the white eyeless  
face of snow. The places in this book  
were true, until all the names changed.

ii.

Mockingbirds, and fireweed seven feet tall  
beside the highway. You'd think  
you were home. Alaska  
is where the river won't flow because  
the old rage drove by one day and clicked it  
into a snapshot, and roving herds of reindeer  
and elk, huge bodies to minimize  
surface area with legs so thin they do not feel  
the cold. Alaska is where the wood beam  
comes through the wall, where the chain pulls  
over and around it, snags like a gear, the torque  
equal to the strength of the weakest link.  
Alaska is the wall she runs into every time  
she thinks she's human and has a choice.  
Alaska is one abortion too many, a primitive  
water wheel that reaches the congealing river  
on the other side of the wall, although  
there is no mill, and no use at all  
for whatever energy it generates.

## Pueblo Medicine

After she got too sick for phone calls  
and because she was a woman  
energized by outrage, I mailed Kathleen

whatever would rile her up -- once  
a postcard of Miss Universe contestants,  
in swimsuits, spike heels, full length

furs (open down the front, as you will  
already have imagined) posing  
on the high dusty plateau of Sky City Mesa

along with Miss Acoma Pueblo of that year  
-- a young woman, maybe 5'1, thick glasses,  
round cheery face, a band across her forehead.

Her Moccasin feet are parallel, shoulder width  
apart. This is not a joke, gentle listeners.  
Kathleen would know not to laugh.

She would point out that Miss Acoma  
is darling of the oldest continuously inhabited  
city in two continents. It's survived drought,

Spaniards, Jicarilla Apache, European measles,  
the Catholic church, partition, whiskey, statehood,  
the Bureau of Indian Affairs, MTV, and casinos,

and they sold me this postcard  
which is not for sale anywhere else.  
You can laugh now. Kathleen would.

## IN ON THE TAKE

### **TAKE OFF**

I take you off like a lid, like a lizard skin, like a pair of stretched socks, like those rubber gloves since AIDS. I take you off like a spell, like eye make-up, like an empty spool in the Scotch tape dispenser. I take you off the team, off guard, offshore, off stage, off the record, off the cuff, offhanded. I take off 10%. I take you off like shutters, like a mask, like a broken record. I take you off the payroll, off the air, off the church roll, off the roster

### **YOU TOOK TOO MUCH**

I take away your rights and appurtenances, I take away your privileges, your deed of ownership, your honor, your vacation time, your coffee break, your tax advantages, your car keys. I take away your credit cards, your humanity, your chair, your medications, I take your breath away. I take away your first born, your inheritance, your perks, your dessert

### **TAKE IT ALL BACK**

I take you unawares, I take you captive, I take your word for it. I take your ad out, I take your likeness, I take your Queen, I take your 12 tricks, I take you by the hand, I take you prisoner, I take you under control, I take you out, I take your life

### **TAKE OVER**

I take office, take renewed interest, take place, take leave. I take cello, take a turn, take a scythe to the weeds, take first place, take issue, take my own sweet time, take personally, take a different route, take a long time to dry. I take two to tango, I take size 9, take a headcount, take any and all wooden nickels, take out Chinese, take for granted, take the heat, take the mike, take five, take things as they come, take a bath, take at face value, take Holy Orders, take 2 from 9 without carrying, take a powder, take heart, take a leak, take human form, take a look

## You Are Here, At The X

Aimless walking. I bring along description that defeats observation, lunar eclipse, a grandmother's eye, friendship before betrayal, clean teeth, chickenpox, a flickery home movie about hunting, homesickness, the tyranny of older children, terraces down to the street, the way to school.

Turning North, moving faster, there are neighbors to carry, old age, old heart, a blowtorch for the frozen water pipes, paranoia, some woman with no face, a thwarted attempt to help, 8-year-old's curiosity, her hands growing strong in the clay.

Then another turn, maybe East, I'm dizzy. Now I pull my little sister, who got model airplane glue in her eye. We are both screaming. Another neighbor I call a witch. There's first romance, unrequited, and my first cherry tree, crowding the bedroom window. The bark of the tree shines black and peels like a birch. All year, a force in the old trunk strains out through the branches. Only in spring, sudden white and later the small sour cherries and all those birds.

Another turn, where am I? The back yard opens out, without detail. My parents' bedroom windows above me. Hayfever and sneezing, rapid sneezing. A garage, half century later the setting for dreams. A back fence, on which I project all cartoons about cats singing at midnight. Grass, of course, trash barrel, blond cocker spaniel, his grave dug years later in a different state, my mother falling, blood all over the back of her head. My mother, only 32 or 33 years old.

## Nativity: Guadalupe Mesa

I don't know many words for happiness.  
It's not what I've tried all my life  
to say. But the habit of saying is strong  
and I begin again -- a child's grave attention,  
pulling the names for what she sees  
from the babble that eddies around her.

I watch how the sun polishes twists  
of dead cedar like thumbs against a nickel,  
how my daughter's neck bends to her book,  
cottonwoods in the canyon floor glow  
lime green with the privilege of water,  
how my fingers, curling to sift the wind,  
outline with a mild gray-blue light. It seems  
the wind here is part of the sky.

On a map, I find the mountains  
west of the mesa, *Nacimiento*--  
is that memory or Christmas? A siren  
railing its way along Hwy 4 provokes  
the older warning of coyotes. Dust  
opens out and up -- chaos is the universe  
laughing -- behind a pickup scrabbling  
down to the main road. I am told:  
*Nacimiento* is birth.

The secret is out -- the baby  
was hurt and tried not to cry.  
Finally, there is flesh, I live

in an earth house, the sun  
assumes its place with the moon.  
All night, cool air off the mesa  
puffs through the window against  
my blanket. I dream a tentative hand  
nudges my shoulder, still hesitant  
to touch my hair.

## Girlchild

*for Julia Rae*

Welcome! small new sister!  
We crowd around your basket,  
    fairies at a christening.  
We grant you  
    beauty  
    generosity  
    courage  
    to prick your finger  
    when it's time,  
the strength to live  
    through a hundred year sleep.

## Self Portrait In Prismacolor Pencil, With Sky

She's forgotten herself in a watercolor sky.  
Plummets away from us, trusting color to catch her.  
No horizons, no ups or downs in this physics,  
nothing beyond turquoise, raspberry, two purples.

She's forgotten us, too, and our satellites, our ozone holes,  
bedtime stories of angels with trumpets and news.  
She roves through them all, her eyes closed,  
two small upturned new moons.

In first grade, with art pencils and sturdy paper,  
she's sketched her own face and hair, added a bow,  
filled them in with pale strokes, staying inside the lines.  
Then without asking permission, sloshed into watercolor,

drenched the background with floppy brush loads of paint,  
jettisoned rules, broke the hold of earth and reason.  
We want her back. We want her to open her eyes:  
she's pinwheeling across armed borders, S/N Korea,

Mexico/US, without reconnaissance or perspective.  
Our warnings and instructions die away in the thin air.  
There's no answer: her mouth's another crescent,  
serenely closed. On she spins, heedless in a tangerine dress,

harder and harder for us to see against the glowing sky.  
She doesn't know how dangerous this is, how we miss her.  
Doesn't seem to know she could ever fall.

*from artwork by Clara Sophie Haymon*

## A Good Pine Box

A cardboard box, the kind refrigerators came packed in—that would have been ideal, thought Branigan. Cheap, biodegradable, yet sturdy enough to prevent any traumatizing accidents. Corrugation was a miracle. But that would have been too easy. Made too much sense.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Cairo.

“A lot of things,” Branigan said.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. The physics of cardboard?”

“That’s nice,” said Cairo. “You know, that isn’t something I’ve considered much.”

Branigan sorted out in silence whether she was mocking him or not. There wasn’t much to look at on this stretch of the trip. Pine tree, pine tree, pine tree... A good pine box would suit him just as well.

“How much further till the turnoff?” asked Cairo.

Branigan refocused on the creased sheet of directions. They were driving to a monastery where they made coffins. They’d be needing one for Branigan soon. Stage IV pancreatic cancer.

He held the paper several distances from his eyes until he was able to read. Then he did his best to estimate the car’s position on the thick black line that crossed a curvy dashed one. “Not long,” he said. “Ought to be the next exit. Then another twenty minutes after that.”

“Bran, if you could do it over... I mean, with what you now know...”

“I think I see where you’re going with this,” said Branigan. “And I want you to stop.” They both had agreed to be upfront about the situation, but sometimes Cairo took it too far, could be overly blunt or overly cheery. He wanted nothing better than to put his head back and tune out everything except for the clicking of tires on the road. But he worried his wife would miss the exit.

“I’m sorry... I know... I always do this.”

“That’s it up there.”

“What?”

“Turn now.”

“Oh— ”

Cairo cut the wheel. Any harder, and they would have fishtailed. Branigan leaned forward as though to get a better look at the triangular gulley that would have swallowed them had her reaction time been slower.

There were no other vehicles turning off at the exit. So once they cleared the shoulder and made it back on the off-ramp, Branigan could sit back and monitor the incremental slowing of his heart. He felt like a passenger inside himself, who in turn was a passenger inside this car. And he wondered how many other layers there might be to this, not just inside himself but out. Breathing, heartbeat—involuntary systems. The whole world was on auto-pilot.

As the trees thickened around them, he could tell Cairo was making quick glances between him and the road. His impulse to yell about her driving had calmed now, and he lowered his window to let in the fresh pine air.

Cairo was driving extra carefully now, almost to a fault, and Branigan made a conscious effort not to mention this either. She slowed to a complete stop, putting the car in park when they came to the end of the exit ramp. This time she turned fully toward him and waited for him to look back.

“It’s left, isn’t it? We go under the interstate?”

Branigan checked the printout again. “Yes,” he said. But his thoughts were on the trees. He wondered how long their scent would last inside his pine box.

Neither he nor Cairo had much to say as the car rounded the curves of the highway, but the silence wasn’t uncomfortable. Branigan even considered asking Cairo what was on her mind, before dismissing the idea. He thought he knew already. She would be thinking about her driving. Perhaps these cut-over tracts of land that punctuated the forest and stretched out to a distant tree-line. Maybe she was planning the new life she would make for herself once he was gone.

The driving was slower now that they had fallen in behind a logging truck loaded with young pines. Destined for pulpwood, thought Branigan. He watched the tapered bundle in front of them shake to the rhythms of the road. Those trees were only twenty years, tops.

“Do you think I should pass it?”

Branigan couldn't make out his wife's words at first and forced himself to replay the sounds until they had meaning again. He realized that for this, in any case, he had a clear answer. “Yes,” he said. “Next straightaway.” He closed his eyes, listening to the wind quicken and the car's revving engine responding to his wife.

He thought he'd fallen asleep. The next thing he remembered was a slowing, the sound of rocks cracking, rattling their way around beneath the car.

“We're here, honey.” Cairo was smiling, but her eyes seemed distant, preoccupied. The gravel driveway led them from the forest into a vast green clearing. Cows grazed in a distant pasture and several dogs were chasing the car, barking merrily behind them on their approach to the monastery buildings.

Cairo lowered her window all the way and slowed in the vicinity of a monk in a brown cassock, crossing a well-tended lawn. He carried a bucket and walked in the direction of some pecan trees.

“Excuse me!”

“Father,” snapped Branigan. “Call him Father, for godsakes.”

“Father!”

Branigan wondered if they should speak to him at all. He knew some monks were supposed to be silent. He felt relieved when the monk turned to them and answered.

“Just keep following the drive to the other side. You'll see the spaces marked for guest parking. The casket-works are back there, too.”

Cairo thanked him. “Such a nice man,” she said once they were driving again. “A real man of God.”

Branigan thought about letting this go, but couldn't. “How do you know that? Just because he wears a robe? And strolls around this monastery?”

“That's got nothing to do with it, Bran. I can tell from his eyes. He

looks happy.”

“Here we go again. More of that eyes-are-the-windows-to-the-soul bullshit. I guess I’d look happy too if all I did was gather nuts and chant all day.”

Cairo stopped the car. “Bran, if this is how you’re going to be, I’d rather not even go in there. I’m not bringing that attitude of yours around these people.”

“Come on, Cairo... I’m sorry, OK? I need a coffin, right?”

“Just behave yourself, okay?” Cairo continued down the driveway. Rounding the largest of the brick buildings, they didn’t see any more monks, but they did see a small white statue of the Virgin Mary situated inside a stone grotto surrounded by yellow flowers. Cairo made the sign of the cross. Branigan knew she hadn’t been to church in years, but didn’t say anything.

The driveway widened into a full-fledged parking lot, and Cairo parked the car in one of the visitor’s spots beneath an ancient live oak tree. Its branches looked heavy with silver coils of Spanish moss. “Isn’t it lovely, Branigan?” And Branigan had to agree. It was lovely, but he felt anxious now that everything had become so quiet. He wondered what the other monks were up to this time of day, and tried remembering what it might have said in Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*. It had been a while since he’d read that sort of thing. He half-hoped to hear the buzz and whine of table saws, industrious monks preparing vessels for the afterlife.

“That must be the casket-works over there.” Cairo pointed towards a wooden structure at the end of a short path. Branigan would have guessed it was a barn, but Cairo was right: there was a small sign in the shape of a forearm and attached hand. The index finger extended toward the building. On the sleeve was etched the word “Caskets” in gothic script. Branigan grew even more uneasy. It reminded him of something on a board game he used to play as a kid. He thought it had been called *Go for Broke*.

He was feeling better once they started walking again and entered a patch of sunshine. The day wasn’t cold exactly, but it was early November and the direct sun provided a welcome source of warmth. Branigan spotted a brass bell suspended from a kind of wooden gallows. A rope dangled from

its clapper. "I guess that's our way in."

"I'll do it!" Cairo was excited, almost giddy.

But as Branigan looked around the monastery grounds, he felt an irrational fear, as though they might try to bury him here this very day.

A portly monk threw open one of the big barn doors, and Branigan couldn't stop himself from looking at the man's rounded features and thinking of him as Friar Tuck. Even worse, he knew this was exactly what he had wanted: To give himself over to thoughts about a fat man living off the fat of the land. But the truth was he felt comforted and even grateful that a gaunt skeleton of a man hadn't answered the bell instead.

"Welcome!" said the man, who introduced himself as Brother Pat. He slapped Branigan's back, hard.

I'm sick, thought Branigan, and this man just hit me. The blow had hurt, but after the initial shock, Branigan realized he felt invigorated, as though he might punch Brother Pat. Maybe I'm not dying after all, he considered.

When they stepped inside, they were in a room with several wooden coffins and a shelf of smaller boxes designed for cremains.

"They're so pretty!" Cairo said, massaging the smooth finish of a ruddy cypress casket.

Brother Pat's cheeks colored. "We do our best. I don't think it's sinful to say, we take a certain amount of pride in our work here."

"You should. They're beautiful."

Despite himself, Branigan had to admit that he wouldn't mind being buried in something like that.

"I'll show you the works," Brother Pat said.

They followed him into another part of the building, into a room equipped as a workshop. Stacks of lumber lined one wall and racks of exquisite hand tools hung from another. In the middle, there were worktables scattered with sandpaper, paint brushes, and several cans of varnish. No power tools, observed Branigan.

Brother Pat seemed to know what he was thinking. "We make everything by hand here. The old-fashioned way."

"So how long does it take to build one of these?" Branigan asked.

“Oh, not long. We can get started on yours today, and before you leave, it will be ready for the brothers in the finishing room.” He led them into another chamber, where two older monks looked up briefly from their work. They were collaborating on a single casket, planing a beveled pattern into the lid.

Cairo whistled in appreciation, and despite the monks’ serious expressions, one of them cracked a smile.

“Brother Leo... Brother Timothy... We have visitors from the city.” Brother Pat made a courtly, almost dainty, gesture to indicate Branigan and his wife.

“Pleasure,” said Brother Timothy, who wasn’t smiling, but still looked pleasant enough. These monks didn’t radiate the same energy that Brother Pat did, but Branigan felt okay with this. They were older, and it seemed to him that either might beat him to the grave. But then he thought he saw Brother Pat make some subtle indication with his eyes, as though telling the others, *It’s for him. He’s the one that’s dying.* But he decided not to let this spoil his mood. What difference did it make now?

After they left the elderly monks to their work, they were standing once more in the main workshop. “So, are you ready?” Brother Pat asked.

Branigan looked at his wife. He thought it was an awful question, but she seemed so serene and reassuring that he nodded anyway.

“Good. Very well, then.” Brother Pat began taking Branigan’s measurements. “Yes, yes... Fine,” he mumbled, as he recorded the numbers in a pocket-sized notebook. Then he started giving directions to Branigan. They were lifting boards and rounding up tools, carrying them to the table where Cairo was clearing a space. Never in his life had Branigan imagined building his own coffin, and yet what seemed most absurd was this unshakeable feeling of gratitude that he still had the strength to do this kind of physical work. He’d never once made a casket in his life, but he knew quite a lot about building things.

As they worked, Branigan reflected on the irony of it all. The monks used to make all the caskets themselves. But the morticians’ association had threatened them with legal action, said they weren’t properly licensed. The monks had self-imposed a moratorium on outright sales of coffins until they

could sort out the mess. But in the meantime, they offered their services in this way, with the sweat equity of the dying. They jokingly called it their “ultimate retreat” since no one would likely be back for another.

Still, Branigan hadn’t built anything in years. He’d once romanticized becoming a carpenter and even discussed with Cairo the idea of enclosing their garage and opening up a small shop. He’d been laid off from the engineering firm, but at the time they still thought they’d be having children. So rather than take out loans and assume the risk of a small business, Branigan went to work on a contract basis, moving from one lousy industrial jobsite to another. He’d always tried his best never to look back.

Cairo was helping out where she could, bringing Brother Pat additional tools from the rack, or else applying pressure to a board while Branigan made a cut. As the pieces of the box assembled before them, Branigan couldn’t help but wonder what it might have been like to have worked from home all those years with his wife.

Brother Pat had been right. In just a few hours’ time, they had the box constructed and ready to send on to the other monks. But Branigan wanted to tell him to wait. He felt a sense of urgency coming over him, and he wondered what he could possibly tell his wife and the monk at this advanced stage.

Cairo rubbed his shoulders. “What is it, honey?”

Brother Pat looked serious for once.

At that moment, Branigan felt the full force of how much he loved his wife and this whole broken existence. And he wished with all his heart that they were building furniture together instead of this coffin.

## Shedding

Degrees of malted summer burnishing,  
transitioning to mid-October. Some  
docked at the top like priests; I think of it  
as autumn-patterned baldness. Strings of leaves  
combed neatly over naked tonsures shaved

and almost skinless, wrinkled-baby raw  
(although the wind will change that)

over ground  
as decorated as a barber-shop  
with hair-cutters gone mad, a sprinkle-sound  
like scissors sliding,

caramel and brown  
blown scattershot, leaves falling without stop  
on softly crispy, rustle-folded ground  
fermented to an even bronze-tone: drop  
your midsummer pretensions: leaves fall *down* –

## Savoring Every Fibre of A Peach From the Local Market

Tutored under the watchful glare  
of Sister Mary Christabel  
who could spot abysmal habits  
in a boy's posture from  
behind her black habit while  
chalking diphthongs onto a board,  
I get to reflect - one to three times  
an hour - what a disappointment  
I am to everyone who has ever  
known me, even incidentally.

To pity my parents in their  
shiny Cadillac-caskets, their  
underground capsules that  
float them through time  
toward a trumpet's blast.  
How hard it must be to churn  
with disgust inside a skin gone  
mummy-tight while your son just  
gazes into another green-grey dawn.

As my heart starts to match  
staccato rhythms the woodpecker  
tattoos into bark, I refuse  
to get up. Oh no, not for love  
nor money, do I rouse.

## The Mind of the Sun

At all times, the mind of the sun is changing.  
The sun gives off thoughts  
the way it gives off light --  
indiscriminately, into space.  
It is not the way we hand an orange  
to another person.  
The thoughts rise out of the oblivion  
which is inside of things.  
Imagine that the sun is a tree  
whose leaves are every color of the spectrum  
and some of them invisible to our eyes.  
A strong wind, which is unceasing,  
blows the thoughts of the sun across space.  
Therefore,  
the sun cannot remember anything.

## **Forsythia**

The forsythia opens in the springtime  
like yellow eyelashes.

All summer long  
the eyelashes are green.

The eyes are also green. They are so many.  
By day, they look up into the blue sky.  
When it rains, they look up into the rain.

In the winter, the forsythia is gray.  
It is like an old book, a loved book,  
far up in your bookcase, almost forgotten.

## **The Summer Orchestra**

The clarinet plays a green note at dawn.  
The sun is a red note, then yellowish white.  
The piano does not have black keys and white keys.  
It has black keys and deep green keys.  
In the afternoon there is a percussive heat.  
The wind instruments play vowels, of course.  
The instruments tune up all day long,  
day after day,  
through the incandescent summer.  
Green notes hover and dissipate in the landscape.  
It is like an orchestra before the performance.  
Except that there is no symphonic performance—  
there is only this continual tuning.

## **Two Stories**

### **9 Cigarettes**

Mohamed awoke on the rooftop a little before dawn and ate the honeyed nuts he had saved for his breakfast. Mohamed was not his real name. He had forgotten the name his mother gave him just as he had forgotten her. It was as if he had been born one day nine years old with the knowledge of how to make a beggar face, weave a camel from a palm leaf, and say “I didn’t do nothin” in five languages. He stood on the edge of the roof and peed down the rain spout watching dawn break over Marrakesh. He had ten dirhams and nine cigarettes. He couldn’t decide if he wanted a yogurt, a plate of steamed snails, or a pastry. If he kept the dirhams and sold the cigarettes and if he could find the American and sell him more woven camels at three cigarettes apiece, he could sell those, buy hashish and still have ten dirhams. He was rich.

As the crackling loudspeaker blared the call to prayer, he made his way down to the street careful to avoid the other boys and the men who tried to catch them. He stood in a doorway in the souk humming a song he heard on the radio and lit a cigarette. The yogurt stand would open in an hour and the old man would take three cigarettes for a yogurt. That left five. If he couldn’t find the American he could try the German couple from yesterday but they only paid one cigarette per camel and they made him make six but only bought one. The shops were opening and the dealers and craftsmen were setting up. Soon the souk was a hive of activity; there were radios playing and people talking, hammering tin, working sewing machines, and foot powered lathes.

Mohamed was the first customer at the yogurt stand. The old man smiled at him and said, “You know I don’t take cigarettes from the other boys, only cash. But for you little Berber...what’s a satim to a cousin?” “Thank you sir,” he replied. The old man said this every time, and Mohamed was never sure

what he meant. He crouched down behind a basket stand and ate, watching the cafe for the American.

The first time they met he tried to steal his wallet. The American slapped his hand hard and Mohamed started swearing “*Merde, je n’ai rien fait... Yo no hice nada* ..Shit, I didn’t do nothing.” “Yeah ya did you’re tryin to steal my wallet.” Mohamed rubbed his hand and put on his best beggar face.

“You are American? Madonna, Cat Stevens.” Sam laughed. “Yeah I’m American. *Excusez-moi garçon, un croissant pour mon ami.*” The waiter was visibly angry that Sam had asked a street urchin to sit down at the cafe, but he brought the croissant and asked Sam if he wanted another cappuccino. Mohamed pulled out a small palm leaf camel and said “You buy? Five cigarettes.” “Three,” Sam replied. “Are you from Taghijit? That’s the only place I’ve ever seen those.” “Four,” said Mohamed. “Three,” Sam replied. Mohamed put three more camels on the table and Sam picked two and gave the little boy six cigarettes.

“Give me one dirham.”

“I gave you a croissant and six cigarettes,” Sam laughed “and now you want money?” Sam felt bad that he had slapped the boy’s hand even though he was a thief. He could feel the waiter becoming more and more angry, so to get rid of the boy, he handed him ten dirhams under the table and said, “For your mother. No for you/ *vous famille. Savy?*” He waved the boy away and went back to his book. The waiter came to the table, “No good. Rats. One time OK. No more. *Savy?*” “*Savy.*” Sam replied.

Mohamed waited everyday to see the American again and he was sure today would be the day.

As the sun rose higher over the square, Mohamed sat in the shade behind a basket stand weaving his tiny palm camels. He was watching six boys surround groups of tourists. They begged maybe three dirhams between them. He had no need of company and no desire to split his money. He knew they would take his if they could, so he watched them like a mouse watches a cat. He always knew where they were and made sure they didn’t see him. He thought of himself as a ghost—no one knew him and no one could see him unless he wanted them to. He knew every street kid, every hustler, every

pervert, every religious fanatic, and every cop. He had the square, the souk, and all the people in it mapped out.

He was weaving with extra care as he was also waiting for the Germans to come back and this time he was not going to settle for less than two cigarettes apiece before noon. If he couldn't sell them he would drop his price to one so he could sell the cigarettes and buy hashish before dark.

He went to the roof top of the crazy woman's house everyday at sunset knowing the other boys were scared of her. Her name was Hala. She was a wealthy widow with no sons who even the sanest vendors in the souk thought was a witch. Sometimes she would leave a melon or a few dates on the roof for Mohamed even though she had never actually seen him. But Mohamed had seen her: buying food in the souk, haggling over the price of a new frying pan. He followed her for days to see if she really was a witch. One day he watched Hala try on hijabs one on top of another and look at herself in the mirror. The vendor was furious but knowing she was a witch he couldn't say anything. So she kept layering them—ten, twelve, twenty scarves. Then she put them all back and didn't buy any. That was the day Mohamed followed her home and took up residence on her roof.

In the dark night they always knew where each other were. He could tell what room she was in and whether she was happy or sad by what was on the radio. She could tell when he was staring out at the square with its fires, storytellers, and snake charmers or sitting under his dirty tarp smoking hashish and singing the songs he made that day.

By noon he had sold five camels to a group of Spanish tourists for five cigarettes apiece, and begged three dirhams. He bought a full gram of hashish, a bowl of steamed snails, and a large bag of honeyed nuts. His work was done. And he still had the ten dirhams. He thought of buying a gift for Hala. He looked at the silver earrings and the silk hijabs, he looked at shoes and frying pans. He thought if he could sell five camels a day he could save three dirhams and in six days he could buy her a set of Tupperware. Mohamed looked out at the square from behind the basket stall. The boys were gone to the bus station to beg. He walked past the orange juice stand to the cafe where the American was drinking coffee and smoking hashish with a Berber

guide who he knew to be fairly honest. “Hey American.” “*Bonjour mon ami,*” Sam replied. Mohamed didn’t need to beg—he wasn’t selling anything he just wanted to say hello to the kind American. Seeing Mohamed, the waiter didn’t hesitate. He walked up to him and started yelling at the boy to leave. Mohamed tried for a second to explain that he wasn’t begging, that he only wanted to say hello to the American. The waiter punched him in the face, knocking him to the ground. Mohamed stood up, defiant tears of rage streaming down his face. He walked off and the cafe returned to its conversations and cappuccinos.

When Mohamed returned holding a brick only Sam noticed him at first. But in a moment it seemed like the whole square was watching him standing there huffing and sobbing waiting for the waiter to walk outside. Sam walked up and put his arm around the boy turning him around away from the cafe whispering “*Tranquil mon ami, tranquil*” Mohamed looked across the busy square and he could see Hala watching from the basket stand. He dropped the brick and ran through the back streets of the casbah and up the stairs to where he knew he could be alone. Crouched in a corner he lit a cigarette, ate some honeyed nuts, and sobbed until just before sunset.

He made his way across the square and into the souk without being seen by anyone. He climbed up the wall to the roof and there in the corner under his tarp was a clean rug, pillow, and a clay pot of roast chicken and couscous.

## The Curve of the Earth

Lydia Fanshaw awoke from a dream of anvils. She held the image for a moment of the huge anvil on a stump in her grandmother's basement; the vise with the long handles, the dirt floor, and stone walls, the rusted sickles and scythes, racks of mason jars full of string beans and tomatoes, the secret room beneath the stairs where three generations of children had scratched their names, pictures, hexes, and totems into the soft chalk walls through one hundred years of coal dust. The thought passed as it always did to her cousin taking the tinker out of the furnace and putting it on the floor as if it were magical, the drafts making it light up in glowing orange holes. He told her it was lava from the center of the earth, then Grammy Honey would holler down the stairs, "Have you got a tinker out again?" Cleon put it back, shut the door and shouted, "O no ma'am." They both knew he was going to get spanked but it was worth it to see the devil's glowing jewel.

The clock on the wall of her cubicle read 4:50 so she put her laptop and pumps in her big bag, put on her running shoes, and made her way down the hall. She stood in the back of the elevator with her hand on her big black leather bag listening to the drone of office gossip and thinking about death. She was nine when Grammy Honey taught her how to clean a chicken. She was twelve when Grammy Honey had a stroke at the supper table. She was seventeen when she walked in on Cousin Cleon hanging from the hay loft.

The air outside was brisk and the sky was a watercolor of varying grays. The newspaper man was chanting, "Late papers and magazines here... late papers." A homeless woman was peeling an avocado. The pigeon in the doorway stretched its wings to stay on its feet. The skin on its neck was raw and featherless. It was filthy and wet. Lydia took a white handkerchief out of her bag opened it and draped it over the bird skittering around the doorway. As soon as it was covered it became perfectly still. Lydia picked it up, and held it upside down with the top knuckle of her index finger where the skull met the backbone. She could hear the old woman saying, "That's right turn

its head to the side, one hand up, one hand down, short and sharp.” The feet twitched for a moment then stopped. The city was thick with the smell of the harbor as the first raindrops hit the street. She set the dead bird in the boarded up doorway wrapped in its shroud and walked on.



Agnes lived in a trailer next door to the First Church of the Pentecost on Highway 6 outside of Fort Sterling. She had her bible, her toy terrier Roxy, and the mountains above the foot hills along the horizon that ran unimpeded to the edges of the earth. She had given a plot land to the church years ago so the congregation looked after her even though she thought *that speaking in tongues business was a bunch of hooley.*” The twenty years since Jovel’s death passed slowly; sunset into dark, night into dawn, drifting snow into spring rain, long drought summers, and the autumn winds across the prairie.

Agnes kept a patch of grass and flowers that she watered every day at 8:00 in the morning and again after supper. Until this year she had kept it mowed with an electric lawn mower but now a boy from the church did it twice a month. She had to convince him to take the five dollars. “Nobody works for free, so you just take it and it will be our little secret,” she would say in the kitchen over cookies and milk.

He was a quiet boy with red hair and freckles and an unassuming manner that reminded Agnes of her son, Reginald. When the boy got up the nerve to ask about the medals on the wall, Agnes explained how her son was a hero, how he had been the last of his men in a great battle and how he stayed up all night against a hundred enemy soldiers. There was a framed newspaper clipping that told the story of how he held up in his fox hole with a machine gun and the bodies of his comrades all around him when a battalion NVA came out of the jungle. “Everybody was dead. So I just kept firing.” When the sun came up there were dead enemy soldiers everywhere. The article went on in graphic detail under the headline: *Local Hero Receives Silver Star.* Reggie told it to his friends that, “Everybody was dead so I sat in the hole and smoked hash all frickin day until the gooks came out of the jungle in the dark firing and blowing whistles and I just freaked out. Man, there were

so many of them, and I was like off my nut. I mean it. I was so goddamned stoned I didn't even know what was goin' on, and in the morning there were all these dead gooks and the brass is callin me a hero." "What happened to him?" the boy asked in wide eyed wonder. "He died," Agnes said.

That night Agnes was awakened by the sound of voices cutting across the vastness of the still cold air.

"What about the cops I mean do you think its OK to just camp right here?"

"It's a church."

"So what?"

"Unless God left a forwarding address I don't think the church will mind I mean 'I can stay at my father's house as long as I want to.' It's in *The Bible* some place."

"What if the Sheriff or the State pigs don't know that?"

"Seriously Sweetie, we have sanctuary. They can't bug us as long as we are on a church property."

"I've never heard that."

"Didn't you ever see *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*? 'Sanctuary! Sanctuary!'" His Quasimodo impression made Agnes laugh. She could hear the young woman laughing and shushing him as they spread out their piles of clothes and blankets. Silence returned to the empty prairie and Agnes returned to sleep.

In the morning Agnes went out to water her patch of lawn. The lovers were waking up assured that the dawn had found them as alone as the night had. She was bobbing on top of him now beneath the blankets giggling then moaning in little yips. A car passed and they were undisturbed. Agnes watched as they rolled over in their ferocity and her yips were replaced with one "Holy Jesus" then they lay next to each other laughing. Agnes turned away as they wiggled under the covers then she looked back as he was standing up buttoning his pants. He could see her now and whispered to his lover. They quickly rolled up the bedding giggling and whispering to each other.

When they walked over to the patch of lawn Roxy ran out and started barking "Good morning little dog." He said, "Excuse me Mam would it be OK if we used your hose to brush our teeth?" Agnes looked at him with a

sly smile thinking of Jovel when he was twenty, his shock of black hair and three day beard that her mother said made him look like a tramp, but Agnes thought it made him look dangerous. She remembered his gentle touch and the strong smell of his manhood; the nights by the creek when they were newlyweds in his yellow convertible staring at the stars.

Agnes watched her sheepishly brush the hair from her eyes.

The sun was bright and the air was crisp. Cars were passing one after another now.

*Aren't you a pretty girl*, she thought as she handed them the hose.



When the war was over Jovel packed the trunk of his '36 Buick and drove west until he arrived at a windswept gray house five miles down a dirt road. "I heard in town that you might need a few things done around here," he said to Agnes' mother when they met. "I hope you got a room in town cause ya aint stayin here," she replied, holding Agnes behind her leery but grateful. *Lord knows there weren't any men left in town.*

Agnes' mother owned a house and a barn on five square miles of nothing. Her husband bought it during the depression for a song. There was a stand of trees, and property on both sides of Wide Creek. They were going to farm it just as soon as things got better but he died soon after, leaving her with a two year old daughter, a cow, six pigs, and ten chickens. She hoed a small patch, made bread and cheese to sell in town, and cooked a few batches of *clear* in the alembic she kept in a shed behind the barn.

Jovel was on his way to San Francisco, or maybe Alaska. But he wasn't going to where the land and sky extend so far you can see the wind slide over the curve of the earth—until he arrived. When he finished repairing the windmill and fixing the fences he drove into Fort Sterling, got cleaned up and drove back. Jovel walked up to the door in his uniform with a bouquet of daisies he picked along the road and said, "Mrs. Honey, I'd like to pay a call on your daughter."

Agnes and Jovel sat on the porch watching the wind caress the grass as

the night put on a floating symphony of fireflies. The thinnest waxing moon hung over the mountains like knowing wink. Barn owls cooed, and crickets chirped, as the soon-to-be-wed sipped iced tea, and counted the shooting stars.



Darrel was a twenty-year old Belgian Gray that Earl White couldn't see putting down just because he was too old to work. So he became Rebecca's horse. When she was nine, Earl put cinch straps on a blanket and two sets of handles so she wouldn't fall off. There was no need for her to hold the reins as Darrel only went three places: to school, to the store, and home. There was no need to tie him to the hitch because he wasn't going anywhere. If it was dark when Rebecca got on he went to the school, if it was light he went to the store. He always stopped at Agnes Fanshaw's on the way as the two girls were inseparable. There was a table in the yard that Agnes used to climb on Darrel's back.

On the last day of eighth grade, school let out early and Rebecca went down to the creek with a boy named August Hillman. "I just wanna show you something," August said. Rebecca knew what he wanted to show her and thought she wanted to see it. They walked down the path through the thicket of cottonwood trees to the strip of sand at the creek's edge. Rebecca was ready for her first kiss. She closed her eyes and August threw her down and started pulling up her dress. His face was red and wild. He was on top of her now struggling to get his pants down.

She screamed the only thing she could think of "*Darrel!*" August hit her hard in the face. Now she was crying at the top of her lungs. August had his hand over her mouth and his pants down gripping himself when he heard the sound of hoof beats. The great horse barreled down the path taking out anything that blocked his way. When Darrel reached the creek, he swung his huge head knocking August off her then stomped the boys chest, crushing him like a footprint in snow. Agnes arrived moments after. "He tried to rape me!" Rebecca cried, "Darrel saved me."

Agnes was shocked by the sight of the dead boy with his pants down and his chest staved in and her best friend sobbing; her face swollen and her

lip bleeding. It was all she could do to not throw up. She held her friend in her arms and wept.

Within five minutes the school teacher Miss Bartlett and a throng of children arrived. She looked at August's blood soaked body and gasped. "All you children get back to school. Beula May, you run to the sheriff. Go. Go Now. Run." Soon older boys were coming down the trail "Where's August?" one shouted, "we heard he got hurt." Sheriff Wheatly was right behind them demanding they go home. Agnes and Rebecca were holding each other sobbing. Miss Bartlett was sitting on the ground in shock. Darrel was drinking out of the creek.

"Miss Bartlett," said Sheriff Wheatly calmly, "I'm gonna need you to take these girls to my office and send for Doc Jasper. I know this is awful but I need you to do that right now."

"Rebecca can you take your horse and wait for me? I want you to call your daddy. We are going to need him down here right away."

"He tried to rape me," Rebecca sobbed, "Darrel saved me. He saved me."

"OK. I need you go on to my office and write down everything that happened."

The setting sun painted the mountains orange and purple under a buttermilk sky.

Rebecca was sure that she would never stop crying.

Earl White led Darrel to a hole behind the barn.

The sound of the rifle scattered the crows.



The summer after Reggie left for boot camp Jovel told a couple of long haired kids they could camp by the creek if they promised to "clean up their shit and do a few chores around the place maybe make a few bucks." They had a VW van spray painted with wild designs and pictures cut from magazines varnished on the sides. The boy was nice enough, helped fix the roof on the barn. The girl pretty much stayed in the van.

That evening Agnes brought out a pot of new potatoes and snap beans, and man that girl looked hungry. But it was the way she wouldn't come out

of the van that got Agnes thinking maybe she had something to hide. In the morning, after the boy went to work with Jovel, she went to the creek with a basket of biscuits hoping to find out what it was. At first the girl wouldn't come out, but Agnes said, "Come on I need you to help me in the house." The door opened and a sleepy looking girl about sixteen or seventeen got out holding a brand new baby. "Oh I see," Agnes said. Well bring him out here. What? Areya afraid I'm gonna ask for your marriage license? I said him.... Is it a boy?" She nodded with a kind of bewildered look on her face. "Oh he's precious let me hold him." She held the baby cooing "Look at you. Aren't you a handsome boy. What's his name?"

"Moon Beam," she replied.

"Moon Beam, well that's quite a name. How old is he, like two weeks?"

"Seventeen days," she replied with a kind of endless stare.

"He cries a lot. Maybe I am doing something wrong, I don't know."

"I am sure you are doing fine, he looks real healthy. Sweetie, they only want a few things you know: changed, held, or fed. That's about all there is to it. You'd know if he was sick. Wouldn't your mama know if you were sick." She cooed to the baby, "No you're just cryin cause you're hungry or you want your little butt wiped. That's the truth. You are The King of The World and we're just here to your bidding," she said rocking and cooing. "You come on up to the house I have some baby things of Reggies I can give ya."

Grammy Honey and Agnes played with the baby while his mother got some sleep. "Moon Beam? He doesn't look like an Indian. I use to know an Indian family named Three Toes but I mean for Christ's sake that was their last name." The old woman laughed in a whisper.

Over supper, Grammy Honey told the young couple the story of Agnes. "Lloyd Honey was a real go-getter. He bought this piece of land the day after crash of '29. Some fat cat back east had it as his gentlemen's farm. He had a farmer who lived here. That way the rich guy could come in the summer and look out at his so-called farm. There was a vegetable patch and a cow in the barn, I don't know what happened to the farmer when he sold the place. So it was just Lloyd and me, middle of January, snow drifting outside and you just had to be born."

“I had a mid-wife. Did you have a mid-wife?”

“Ruth White. Aggie, do you remember Rebecca’s Gramma? Well she had been through it about fourteen times, so you could say she was a mid-wife. She was supposed to come, they had Darrel hitched to the sleigh all ready to go, but right then her youngest, Rachel, went into labor with Rebecca five weeks early. I’d say it was right on time if you know what I mean. So no, it was just me and Lloyd. That man could do anything.”

Jovel awoke to a knock on the door and the puttering sound of the van driving away. He brought the baby in and woke the women. “Well look what the moon dragged in. I say we call him Cleon after my cousin,” Grammy Honey said. “We’ll tell Sheriff Wheaton he’s your sister’s child.”

“I don’t have a sister.”

“He don’t know that.”

Agnes and her mother fawned over the baby. Jovel liked to say, “There’s my Moon Pie,” and kiss the baby’s belly. They invited the Whites and the Tremblys over for iced tea and *clear*.

“I didn’t know you had another child,” said Rachel White.

“I’m sorry Dear. I didn’t hear you,” replied Grammy Honey. “I was just trying to remember if your wedding was in May or June.” And with that, the origins of Cleon “Moon Pie” Honey were never questioned again.

The heat of summer passed into harvest. The black and white lines of frozen winter furrows thawed into spring. Jovel turned the tractor around and headed for home as Lydia Fanshaw came into the world like a turnip pulled from the earth.

## Into The Desert

*Before the world existed, the holy people made  
themselves visible by becoming the clouds, sun,  
moon, trees, bodies of water, thunder, rain, snow...  
that way, they said, we would never be alone.*

*Luci Tapahonso*

He was alone on the coast,  
a snow owl of the Dungeness.  
He lay awake in winter  
silent with the night.

Prey to the Cooper Hawk,  
he hid in broken woodland.  
Like a warbler near blue-shadowed  
waters he took flight.

Days drifted as white  
clouds within black clouds.  
He wept red Spanish wine  
in the gray dawn.

Lost in desolation's shadow,  
he pitied those who fell prey  
to the peevish stupour  
of psychopharmaceuticals:

Temazeslam, diazedamn, clonazesepam, roads to apodictic habituation,

cataclysmic disinhibition, apocalyptic annihilation.

A prisoner himself, he groaned  
‘What will set me free?’  
The snow owl howled ‘With-draw,  
with-draw-awe to the desert.’

Thus, here is *his* eschatology on pigmented-purple detoxification.

In spring I departed for the Jemez  
through the pueblo to the place of my *padre*  
where days drift without clouds.  
After this I went into the canyon

because water is abundant. I spent  
seven-times-seven-times-seventy days  
afire in a benzene-ring withdrawal.  
I asked -- *will I destroy myself?*

Withdrawal syndrome cursed me –  
panic attacks, tremors, brain fog, sleeplessness, dry retching...  
My mind waxed and waned as stonecrop  
pushed through melting snow.  
By autumn the sound  
of desert waters from a mountain stream,  
the sound of hot springs as they rose from the earth,  
the sound of rain on desert stone was music flowing.

I rested in the fragrance of sage.  
I rested in the hummingbird’s song.  
I slept as if a young child again.  
Then I went home.

## Dyslexical

*Words, you said, mean different things  
to you than other people.* It was only a meal  
we were discussing this time. Indian, to be exact.

The word was *crisp*, and the bone of contention,  
so to speak, was *naan*, but you were having  
none of it, and I had no words for the distance

even breaking bread could put between us,  
the un-built bridge of mutual talk we could not  
seem to get across. I passed the *raita*

in silence, sipped my chardonnay, and after,  
as we walked toward the car, I wanted to point  
toward the drama of the sunset, draw your attention

to the sky's splendid display so you might,  
perhaps, be moved by it, as I was. I might have said  
*azure* or *mauve* or, more simply, *beauty*, but I was afraid

you might not be able – or willing -- to see  
what I was saying. So I kept the pleasure to myself –  
the gift of a moment I did not give for fear

you would not have received what I intended.  
Something else you might have insisted should be  
called by a name I might not ever know.

## Seasonal Sonnet

The sky's deciding what it wants to do.  
One minute it looms – a dark, ferocious gray,  
the next it shimmers – a clear flat blue,  
as if two seasons had claims on this day.  
Me, I'm deciding what I want to wear.  
If I'll be warm or chilled or wet or dry.  
I've draped two different outfits on the chair,  
trying to match my fashion to the sky.  
But the sky, the day, the season's bent on change –  
whether it's weather or life we're speaking of.  
The only choice I have is to love what's strange,  
because, in the end, isn't everything – even love?  
Whatever I chose to wear will have to cover me  
and leave me open to whatever the weather will be.

## Second Child

It's the edge to Shelly's voice that gets me moving. I find her waiting in the doorway of my daughter's room. She says nothing, just points to the eight year old's push-pin cork board. I squeeze past her stiff form, cupping a hand around her elbow as I pass because I see that flutter of panic in her face.

The bulletin board is a hodge-podge of little girl trivia – silly #1 ribbons for showing up with homework done, the certificate for earning her brown belt, the ticket stub from *Hunger Games* and postcard for some related contest waiting to be mailed. In front of these are random photos of the family, of Shelly and me with the girls clasped winningly between us, of Lexi and Jayden like wet sheepdogs at the water park, of the two girls trying to haul an oversized pumpkin toward the camera, of me rubbing noses with Lexi, and one of Shelly and Jayden holding vee-signs behind each other's head, while crossing their eyes.

I turn to Shelly, confused.

“Look!” she says with a whipsaw of impatience in her voice. She nods again toward the cork board.

So I crouch down and run my fingers between the overlaid photos, mementoes of play dates, and certificates of achievements both real and coddled, but it is only when my fingers graze the edge of a photo and temporarily lift the edge of it away from the board that I see that the photo has holes in it. Methodical, neat pinholes through the eyes of her step-sister. I go back to every photo on the board, lifting it and seeing the empty white space where Jayden's eyes should be. There is nothing else, no ripped edges, no signs of loss of control. Only the eyes. Only Jayden.

I rise to my feet, my middle-aged father's knees complaining as I ask them to receive my weight. I step over to look at the bookcase with its piles of *Highlights* magazines and *Grimm Sisters* books. There are photos here, too, in decorative frames of girlish polka dots and bubble-fonted BFFs, but

the exclamatory frames fade against the stark white pin-holes in my step-daughter's images.

I turn to my second wife, to her worried face and her arms crossed tightly like a citadel against my daughter, against her fantasy transgression, her silent, guerilla resentment.

The front door downstairs bursts open and the loud laughter and screams of our girls fills the entranceway, followed by the thumps of their book bags hitting the floor.

"Hello?" yells Jayden, followed by a pause. Wild whispering.

"We're ho-ooooomme!" the girls sing together and collapse into giggles. The sound retreats toward the kitchen.

Shelly and I stand motionless, watching each other warily. My wordless plea creeps through the tense air of the bedroom toward her. Even at six paces, I see the exhaustion behind the fright in her eyes. Her crossed arms lower like a drawbridge coming down.

"Jayden?" she calls, her eyes still on me. "Come here a sec, honey."

"Sure, Mom." Jayden's voice floats up the stairs before the girl herself does.

I am back at the bulletin board looking at the sightless eyes in the photos by the time I hear our bedroom door click shut behind the two of them, with Lexi and me on the other side.

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*The conflict of loyalties must be recognized right from the beginning.*

—Rules for Stepfamilies from the Stepfamily Association

"I think I need your help."

"What's up?" I clamp the phone between my ear and shoulder and stretch to throw some copies of old contracts into the shredder.

"I'm in the grocery store parking lot," she says. "Lexi's with me."

I stop what I am doing and begin to listen. She doesn't say anything further. That's all I need.

"I'm on my way," I tell her, getting up from my desk. I am already out

the front door when my cell rings again.

“Bring your keys,” she tells me.

When I arrive at the grocery store a few minutes later, I drive up and down the lanes looking for them. Shelly is standing at the rear bumper of the minivan, looking up each time a car turns into her lane. A grocery cart is next to her, the flimsy white plastic of the grocery bags flipping back and forth in the breeze.

Putting the car into park, I hit the caution lights and wave another car past before going around the front to meet her.

“Where’s Lexi?” I ask.

“Did you bring the keys?” Shelly asks back.

I offer them to her, but she doesn’t take them. I look more closely at her. Her eyes are welling up with tears that she is trying not to let fall.

“Hey,” I say, concerned.

“She’s locked herself in,” Shelly tells me. “Or maybe I should say she’s locked me out.”

I peer through the back window of the minivan trying to see Lexi, but there is no movement in the car.

“Everything was fine,” Shelly says. “I told her I needed to stop at the store to pick up a few things for dinner.” She feels the need to reiterate it. “Everything was *fine*. We were chatting about dinner and I asked if she would help me cook, and she seemed excited and asked what we were making, and, oh, we were just nattering on, really. Nothing big, nothing important—“

“It’s okay, Shel. Honestly,” I reassure her. I slide her handbag off her shoulder and lower it into the grocery cart next to us.

A car driving down the lane towards us slows. The window rolls down and a woman with perfect lipstick peers out at us.

“Coming out?” she inquires.

Next to me, Shelly straightens. “Not yet,” she apologizes, gesturing at the half-empty grocery cart. “Still unloading.” The plaintive tone I’d heard in her voice a moment earlier was gone. I sense something unspoken passing between the women and look sideways at Shelly, but the expression on her face has gone neighborly and pleasant.

The woman's eyes flick toward me. "Okay, then," she says and begins to close her window as she pulls away.

I raise a hand after her. "Thanks!" I call out. I feel stupid immediately. When I turn back to Shelly, she has deflated again, but the tears are gone. "Tell me the rest," I say.

"I don't know. There isn't a rest. I told her we were making stewed chicken and I needed her help making dumplings, and that I was getting baby onions to cream, and maybe some broccoli since I knew she liked it. And then I asked if she wanted to come with me, or stay in the car since I was only going to be a minute---." She stops suddenly. "That's okay, right? I thought it wasn't a big deal to let her sit in the car by herself for a minute. I used to let Jayden wait in the car for me when she was the same age---."

"It's fine," I say, gently putting my hands on her shoulders.

"When I came out, she'd locked the doors. I knocked on the window, but she wouldn't even look at me. The other times---"

"Hold up. She's done this before?" I ask.

Shelly shrugs. "A couple of times, but it was like a joke between us. I didn't think it was worth mentioning because...well, it felt funny. She always unlocked the doors after a couple of seconds, you know, after she'd seen my surprise at finding the doors locked. But this time she wouldn't unlock the car."

I can feel the heat creeping up the back of my neck as I make a move toward the passenger side of the minivan. Suddenly, Shelly's misery segues into protectiveness. She puts a hand out to stop me. "No, don't," she tells me.

But I am already at the window, glaring at my daughter. She is staring straight ahead, ignoring me. I knock, hard, and see her jump slightly. When she turns toward me, both of our stony and intractable expressions are reflected in the glass.

"Open up," I tell her. She turns away to stare out the front window again. The anger concusses in my gut. Cursing, I begin fumbling for my key to the minivan.

Shelly has come up behind me and is trying to talk me down. She is talking, fast. "Wait! It can't be easy on top of everything else. Even in the best of circumstances, we knew we could expect some things like this, right?"

Dan? Right?” She puts a hand on my arm. “Maybe it’s not even about that,” she says.

I look at my daughter on the other side of the glass, pretending to be inscrutable. It is. About that. Because creamed onions were something Lexi’s mother used to make.

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*There are no ex-parents, only ex-spouses. Begin to get information on how to best handle the prior spouse.*

—Rules for Stepfamilies from the Stepfamily Association

When I walk into the kitchen to refill the ice bucket, Shelly and Natalie are talking. They grow abruptly quiet when they see me. The suddenness of their silence is so obvious that I hesitate in the doorway, unsure whether to continue into the room.

Shelly smiles at me and gives a little nod of permission, but I have seen the sheepish look on Natalie’s face, too, so I wait for her to give some sign, as well.

I know what they must be discussing. Not that I mind. Early on, there was a lot of that kind of discussion floating around, and I couldn’t really blame Shelly for trying to get as much information, from as many sources as possible. And Natalie had been good friends with my first wife.

It wasn’t that Shelly didn’t trust me to tell her everything. She did. But Shelly is the kind of woman who wants to be as well-informed as possible about everything that has to do with her. She is a collector of facts and data, even about things that can’t be objectively quantified. She makes decisions with a certainty that I admire; she makes decisions and doesn’t look back. Collecting information is just something she is going to do.

Natalie and Sal had been there from the beginning. And even though she had started out as Ellen’s friend, she and Sal had stood by me from the first.

“Come in, come in.” Natalie beckons me into the room. “We were just talking about Ellen.”

“I figured,” I say. I raise the ice bucket. “Sal and I were working our way

through that pitcher of Sangria, but our domination cannot continue without more ice.”

Shelly laughs lightly and moves to take the bucket from me. Over the banging of the ice cubes as they drop into the bucket, Natalie mouths the word “sorry” to me. I shake my head to let her know it isn’t necessary. Shelly brings the bucket back to me and I take it from her. Her hands continue on around my waist and clasp behind my back. It is hard sometimes not to be bowled over by the woman’s generosity.

“Hey.” She gives me a little playful shake. “Don’t let the chicken burn while you decimate the sangria, ok?”

“No chance,” I assure her. I press my lips against her hair.

“We’ll be out in a sec,” she says, letting me go.

I leave to go back to the barbeque grill and my conversation with Sal about the latest round of peace talks. But I can’t help it. For a moment, I pause just out of sight of the kitchen doorway to listen. There is an awkward silence from inside the room.

“So,” Shelly tries to pick up, “you were saying you never thought?”

I hear the bottom of a glass tumbler scrape against the kitchen counter, and then Natalie speaks. “None of us did. To tell you the truth...” she hesitates. “To tell you the truth, the main reason I never worried about it was because she had become so narcissistic.”

“Narcissistic?” Shelly wants clarification.

There is another pause, longer. Then Natalie says, “I figured she’d never do anything that would jeopardize herself, that she wouldn’t risk her own freedom, I mean. Even as she got worse, her self-interest never lessened.”

I look down into the ice bucket. The ice is melting into a big clump. I am going to have to break it apart to get at the individual pieces when I get outside.

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*Know that unrealistic expectations beget rejections and resentments.*

—Rules for Stepfamilies from the Stepfamily Association

“Dad, when is mom coming back?”

Lexi has dragged a counter stool over to a cabinet above the stove, and is trying hard to sound as if she is only half-interested. Climbing the stool, she busies herself looking for the brown sugar.

I think it has been more than a year and a half since she last asked when her mother was coming home. There had been a time, early on, when I had been having that conversation with her every few days. At the time, I had resented the grueling repetition, but the therapy had helped me get it that a five year old didn't understand, couldn't possibly yet understand, that her mother was never coming back. But Lexi wasn't five anymore.

Since it had been awhile, I wasn't sure whether to stop everything and address the question, or try to match her nonchalant tone and see where things went. I move over to stand behind Lexi as she balances on the stool. I have to stop myself from putting a hand on her to steady her. Now that she is older and needs to be more independent, I try harder than ever to act normally around her, but I still fight off the what-might-happens that come to me in mid-action. Every time I hear a meditation-loving prick talking about learning to live in the Now, I still want to punch something, hard.

With the box of brown sugar in her hand, Lexi turns on the stool and puts her arms around my hovering form. She locks her arms around my neck and, with the ease of a monkey, latches herself onto my back and waits for me to lower her to the ground. I am momentarily washed through with the memory of her at three or four, her chubby little legs too short to clasp around me, of how I'd hold onto her little wrists to steady her there on my back since she didn't yet have the strength to hold herself there.

I crouch by the stool to let her down. She detaches herself from me immediately and brings the sugar over to the mixing bowl where she starts to measure out what the recipe calls for. I give myself one moment as the tidal pull of memory retreats around me, and then I take the cookie sheet from under the oven. I make a decision as I bring it over to the Mix Master.

"She's not, honey," I say, gently. "You remember how we talked about this?" I still have to resist laying my hand on her head, a useless gesture of paternal protection.

"Sort of," she mumbles. She is struggling to break apart the hardened

clumps of brown sugar. We stand in companionable silence, her measuring ingredients and adding them to the mixing bowl, and me waiting. She consults the recipe. “We need the butter now.”

I go to the refrigerator and open the door, reaching for the sticks of butter we’d put there the previous evening to thaw.

“What about Therese?” she asks from behind me. “When is she coming home?”

Everything contracts around me, the shelves of food and condiments on the refrigerator door streak past my vision, until every part of me is one with the blank back wall of the refrigerator. I want the blankness to surround me. Then I notice a spot where some bit of food has splashed and stuck. I make myself focus on that spot so I can ignore how the cold from the stick of butter in my hand is crawling through my entire body.

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*Mother and father (no matter how awful the natural parents) are sacred words and feelings.*

—Rules for Stepfamilies from the Stepfamily Association

When I watch Lexi at the bus stop, an island among the buzzing speed boats of other children, I wonder to myself whether it is better to think your mother abandoned you and didn’t love you, or that she loved you but was crazy and couldn’t do any better than she did. Even as another little girl comes up to her and starts a conversation, I see how Lexi can’t fully give herself over to the interaction. There will always be a part of Lex that holds herself apart now, a tense watchfulness. A readiness to run for her life that these other kids can’t possibly understand.

It’s when I realize that I’ve thought of it in those terms that the fury blinds me.

Therese.

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*Recognize that the stepfamily will not and cannot function as does a natural family.*

—Rules for Stepfamilies from the Stepfamily Association

This day was always hard.

For the first several years, I hadn't been able to even drag myself out of bed. I had lain there all day trying to quantify how I felt: as if barbed wire were being pulled through my brains; as if I was standing on the edge of the chasm of myself, struggling not to fall mindlessly into it; as if I was at the bottom of a black obsidian cone, sides too smooth to pull myself out.

Actually, there were no words for how I felt, but it gave me something to focus on besides the pain. It was either that, or stick a fork in an electric socket.

But Lexi had to be taken care of. There wasn't a choice. Still, every year on this day, I felt it in as much wrecking-ball clarity as I had then. I woke up wanting to die. I spent the day trying to stop myself from driving my car into a wall at 90 mph. At night, I cried myself to sleep. The next morning, I woke up swept numb with exhaustion, but able to go on.

Shelly had been with me for two of these anniversaries. She never asked anything of me, not even to talk. She touched my hand or back in passing, stood close to me at the vanity and then again at the kitchen sink with her hip gently touching mine. She took the day off of work, even though I never asked her to. She wrapped me into her at the end of the day.

My sense of awe at this woman, my throat closes around it. The gratitude lodges there like a swollen plug of cork. Sometimes I catch myself wondering how life would have been different if I had met her first. I covet the imagined banality of that life.

But then I wouldn't have Lexi, or Therese. I can't bear that thought.

Every year, I pull Lex from school on this day. I wait, staring blankly into the mug of coffee which Shelly has put into my hand as Lex finishes coloring the cards she makes each year to put on the graves. While Shelly drives us the cemetery, Lex and I quietly observe the world proceeding as usual beyond our windows. I wonder what Lex is thinking, but then I spin like a dervish away from that scalding thought. The truth is I don't have room

for her pain on this day. I'm full up.

Shelly pulls up to the cemetery gates and the car idles as we get out. She rolls down her window as I come around. Clutching the window frame, I lean down to look into her face. She lays her hand over mine for a moment, but doesn't say anything. Then she puts the car into gear and pulls away. I've already turned to the cemetery by the time she reaches the road.

Lexi is waiting for me, the memory cards hanging at her side. I see the tension in her little bird-frame. Not so little as it was when we first started this, but still delicate enough that I wonder how she doesn't stagger under the load. I offer her my hand, which she takes.

We go to find the graves of her mother and sister.

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*Recognize the hard fact that the children are not yours and they never will be. We are stepparents, not replacement parents.*

—Rules for the Stepfamily from the Stepfamily Association

Shelly lowers the report into her lap. She is sitting cross-legged in bed in exactly the same position she's been in for the last half hour as she read through the court psychiatrist's custody report. She's pushed her maroon reading glasses up on her head and her brown hair curls back around the arms of the glasses as if trying to prevent her from seeing what's in the pages. I am sitting across the room in the easy-back recliner, waiting for her to finish.

"This says there could be a hereditary component."

I think about the paranoid grandfather and about how much I didn't know about that family when I joined it. I nod.

She picks up the report again and puts her glasses back on to read the rest.

"You don't have to sit way over there, you know," she says without looking up.

The tension that has slowed my blood to Medusan stillness breaks when she says it. I stare out the window at the marigolds and impatiens in the flower beds, and I am choked by the ghastly memory of Ellen and I standing across the road, with our backs against the car as we looked those flower

beds, when we were considering buying this house. Inside the car, Therese is asleep in her car seat with the hand-crocheted blanket tucked around her. She smacks her lips and wrinkles her brow as if some dream of fear is going through her baby mind.

It's easy to think that way now, in hindsight. At the time, she was probably just soiling her diaper. But neither her mother nor I turned from regarding the house to do anything about it.

"Well," I said. "What do you say, Hal? Should we buy it?"

When I had met her, Ellen had been working her way through Shakespeare's history plays, and she was obsessed with the Henrys. I'd been calling her Hal ever since. At the time, of course, we never thought anything of the obsessions that cropped up and were mowed down without a second thought. The hundreds of dollars spent collecting teddy bears for children who weren't born yet. The days spent fixated on the lyrics of the same Green Day album. The sudden and total interest in digging a cold cellar out back; in GMOs; in attachment parenting; in trying to determine whether Shakespeare was the author of all the plays attributed to him. We thought it was quirky, a sign of a quick and lively intelligence. I thought it was cute.

"Do we like it?" I asked her.

She grins at me, mischievous and fly-paper sticky with adorable-ness. "I do."

"So, shall we pull the trigger?"

For a moment, she weighs up the house, the flower beds. "The petunias will have to go," she observes. "But yes," she says finally. "We shall."

I am startled back to the bedroom by Shelly's hand on my knee. I blink, trying to orient myself in time. Shelly is crouched by my feet, one hand on my leg to recall me to myself, the other holding out the report to me as if it is a secret state document.

"Just because you could be hit by lightning, doesn't mean you will be," she tells me.

The sharp edges of the memory begin crumbling. I feel them begin to wash away. I am trying to identify the feeling I am feeling.

"We'll be watching for it," Shelly tells me. Her fingers are firm and

confident on my leg. I reach out and tuck those unruly curls behind one of her ears. I think she must be from a line of Amazons. I think it is hope that I am feeling.

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*There is no model for the step relationship except for the wicked stepchild and invariably cruel stepmother of fairy tales.*

—Rules for Stepfamilies from the Stepfamily Association

From my office upstairs, I hear what comes before. And I hear the silence that comes afterwards.

“I wish it had been you instead of Mama!”

Even the powerful slamming of the front door, even the sound of breaking glass in the kitchen, can’t move that silence off the mark.

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*Do not try to overlay the expectations and dynamics of the intact or natural family onto the stepfamily.*

—Rules for the Stepfamily from the Stepfamily Association

“How about waffles this morning?” I ask.

There are murmurs of assent from the girls who are watching the Saturday morning cartoons playing quietly on the television at the foot of the bed, and a noncommittal hum from Shelly who is reading the paper.

Anxious not to disturb the weekend tableau, I make no move to get out of bed. Eyes half-closed, I lie there trying to observe them without seeming to be. Shelly’s knees are bent to prop up the paper. Both girls are snuggled under the covers between us.

Jayden is doing her best to imitate her mother’s focus, with one of her girl detective novels propped up against a bent knee. Her attention keeps flicking from the book to the television and I can see how she is fighting a battle with herself to return her attention to her book. I find myself liking her enormously. Jayden, with her long face and gangly limbs. With her careful

and curious eyes. It had taken a long time for her to stop turning sideways when I went to give her a hug, but she seems to have brokered some deal with her conscience that the world will not split apart in betrayal if she likes me in addition to loving her dad.

Lexi, too, has a book resting on her stomach, but unlike her step-sister, she makes no pretence of reading it. Her eyes are glued to the television, her mouth slightly agape, her fingers absently twisting a piece of the fur on the stuffed bear she holds in her arms. I can hear her breathing through her mouth, a low rhythmic background to the high-pitched, silly voices coming from the TV.

There are deeply satisfying moments of recognition like this one where the thought that we are a family flushes through my veins like a warm water I.V. It never lasts long, but feeling the middle of the mattress sagging under our combined weight, with the inanity of the cartoons floating through the weekend sunlight, I am able to recognize what I, what we, have recovered.

I stretch my arms over my head contentedly and consider actually doing something about the hunger I am starting to feel after the barrage of Eggo and Frosted Flake commercials. Lexi speaks up.

“Mom said we could try that cereal, didn’t she, Dad?”

You can feel how the air shifts. Then Jayden reaches over and takes Lexi’s hand in hers. She does it without taking her eyes from the TV, even though I am pretty sure I saw an alertness come into her face before she did it. She does it to preserve her step-sister’s privacy. I love that kid.

“Maybe,” I tell Lexi. “It’s not the healthiest thing in the world, that stuff.”

Lexi lets Jayden hold her hand until the cartoon comes back on. Then she withdraws her fingers and goes back to twisting the bear’s fur.

\*\*\*\*\*

I reach out to the cork board and take down the photo of Lexi and Jayden messing around at the water park. It was the first family vacation we took together. I remember it very well. Shelly and I hadn’t yet told them that we were thinking of moving in together, but we’d been doing things together for months.

I remember the hope I felt watching Lex and Jayden playing together. I remember the guilt I felt when I felt that hope. I remember the anger I felt at having to feel the guilt. I remember the exhaustion of living in my head.

I was learning to live with that exhaustion. I knew by now that it wasn't ever going to go away. This idea that you get over some things, it's bullshit. You never get over it; you just get on with it.

I place a thumb over Jayden's marred image in the photo so I can stare at my daughter in the picture. She is laughing. She is making goofy faces. She has no idea that Jayden is going to be her step-sister, just the way that I, and Shelly, and the scientists who try to figure these things out, have no idea whether violent behavior can be passed from parent to child.

Lexi comes into her bedroom and drops her book bag on the bed. "Hey, Dad," she grouches good-naturedly. "What are you doing in here?"

"Hey, Lex," I say, keeping my back to her so she can't see the photo in my hand. I move my thumb from Jayden's face and cover Lexi's instead. Even with the pinholes through the eyes, Jayden looks happy. There's no fear there. She isn't afraid. Not like her worried mother trying to make a decision in the bedroom next door. Certainly not like Lexi and me who know the electrifying terror of sudden cataclysm.

I re-pin the photo of the two girls to the bulletin board and regard it quietly. You love your children. You live your life, as much as you can.

"The usual," I answer, as I turn to my daughter and open my arms for her. "Searching for contraband. Hidden treasure. Clues about your imminent take-over of the world and fourth grade."

## At the End of Shame

*After Bergman's Skammen*

At the end of our shame most of us  
carried bundles. I could hear  
a baby crying. One man  
brought a goat.  
The boatman used a stick  
to push us off,  
waded in after us, and climbed in.  
At the end of our  
shame, the beginning  
of our journey across the sea,  
there was so much fog we  
couldn't see anything.  
We couldn't hear anything except  
the water  
beating against the boat.  
I kept thinking  
something lay beyond our shame  
for our crimes against each other  
in the name of saving  
ourselves,  
and there would be  
an end to the shame most of us  
felt, fogged in, lips  
parched, unable to see land  
or even our own faces  
as we appeared now, let alone  
as we'd been before, as we lay  
in the boat listening  
to slow water move us.

# The Courtyard of Song

*For L. C., 3/26/2013*

For a long time I'd listened to the old man  
strum his guitar and sing in the sunlight  
of the courtyard. He'd be there every day  
in his shabby suit while we ate our meals  
and other times later in the afternoons  
while we worked, his voice crackling  
as though he hadn't tasted water  
in many years, as though he formed his words  
from the chalky dust of ancient stones.  
Then the day came when I noticed  
I no longer heard him except the bits  
of his songs that were in my head.  
How long had it been exactly?  
Days, weeks, or even months?  
When I asked the others if they  
remembered, I was told to not  
make trouble. But his music  
was that place: the pale gray stones,  
the wood lattices over our heads,  
the vines, the courtyards, and alleys,  
the trays of food and jugs of water  
the women brought. Maybe, in truth,  
we were there only once, long ago.  
It's hard to remember, the days  
and the toil having been so similar.  
But I could still hear his voice in  
my head, the words and tunes tumbling  
around, long after he'd ceased to sing  
and they'd taken our water away.

from *wired to zone***Chapter 1: Mid-Holiday Weekend**

The call came mid-morning just as I was leaning back, feet propped on desk, sliding into my first REM sleep like a drugged-up shortstop into third, spurs over day's nub. After kicking the better part of a pile of papers all over the floor, I grabbed the receiver and stammered something into it about being a familiar to the secrets of an unknown universe, an inhabiting mango-genie nested in a whirlpool of galaxies wherein portals open through which neon children peek while fruit-like beings hang from transparent trees wrapped in a luminous breeze, and where the mind might find itself complete, indigenous to its own occasion (*at last!*) A barely querulous grunt came from the other end. "Whatever," I said, "this is Max."

It sounded like the Colonel's ex-jockey, ninety-three pound Filipino houseboy but as though someone big was sitting on his mid-section or tattooing his nut-sack with vista out of the Hudson River School. Between grunts and gasping pants, he said the Colonel wanted to see me at Olde Harbor's deserted arboretum, our usual place, soon as I could make it, then added something to the effect that zero might turn up missing, this time the Colonel thought the chatter could be for real; his calibration boys were pissing fits and brick shitting, lathered at the wheel. But my bladder was surfing the crest of a minor tsunami, so I mumbled something to the effect that zero never meant much of anything to me, not really, but that I was open minded. "Maybe I'm cheap *and easy*," I said. (*Maxine's probably right.*) I told him I'd be there as soon as I could.

I flung the receiver down in the direction of the phone's cradle, and squeezing my nuts, hop-hobbled to the head at the end of the hall. Preoccupied as I was, I could still feel Maxine's cheek upon my cheek and her chest upon mine. *We'd only hugged for a few seconds*, I thought, *and that was over eighteen hours ago*, yet such was her pull that I could only think of one thing

while blasting porcelain beneath marrow's song, the glorious four months we had together some dozen years previous (*being's levitation!*), while riding clouds of release, floating up and beyond, weightless, perched on my tinnitus as though upon an airy stream from which I seemed to peer, eyes tight with pleasure, mind wide with wonder, drifting into an ever-lengthening time beyond anticipation, until I felt a child's hand tugging at the pant leg of my consciousness and came shuddering down, finding myself on the tile floor, feet planted wide as I drained, and drained, ... and drained some more. (*Ol' Lazarus!*) As I shook, those lovely weeks with Maxine rowed gently through my mind over a series of ruptured sighs. (*Her hand on my back that first night. ... Later. ... then later. ...*) But as I splashed my face at the sink, it all came back, rumbling and hard: the jealousies, humiliations, breakdowns and botched attempts, losing all sense of worth, standards of self and decency dashed in the wake of her cloying excuses and increasingly adamant disregard, until running away I thought I was shut of her, but wherever she was, I eventually went. She was the magnet that pulled on every fiber of my being, my heart a rose in iron dust, blasted. Her absence, a hole in life's emptiness, where she had been, ashes and the stench of loss. *And now I miss her even when she's there.* Wet comb through balding hair.

When I returned to the office, Dolly was standing in the middle of the floor. Lamb's wool never so fine, eyelashes doing butterfly castanets, soft wad of clover mid-chaw, lower jaw swaying to a rhythm beyond my own. "Come on, babe," I said, "We gotta date with the Colonel." In my rush, I grabbed Shepherdson's tweed coat off the rack instead of my own. Dolly didn't blink so what did I care? *Hell, it don't matter. He's rich,* I said to myself, putting it on. *Sinking his great-granddaddy's fortune into iDex was a stroke of old-money luck or genius,* I didn't know which, but it sure put the zap on the operant conditions of so-called normal life from that day to this, especially after identity cloning stood in the midst of our existence like a muddy boot in the middle of a cranium. Even Olde Arboretum which used to be a place of gaiety and light, a world of music, color and motion beneath sun scatterings, life's verdancy cast upon the sweet dance of Eros, perfumed aires, entrance-and-embrace, pheromones riding updrafts over vibrance of skin bark frond leaf

membrane feather flower petal and fur entwined with the melos of joy rising amid the glancing of eyes, minds alight, soft exhalations of the deciduous weaving the entire with the sweet breath of cedar, oak, cypress, and pine... and not seven years later let to fall, and The City Council won't even call for a vote on its demolition. *The shits!*

Shepherdson's coat felt a bit strange on me. *Patches and tweed. The whole tuna*, I thought as I reached for the knob. The mincing, sexy staccato of Dolly's little hooves on linoleum followed me out the door and down three flights of stairs. Not the take-off of twenty doves' wings nor the slide-trot of a stumbling chorus line, her rhythm trafficked in herself and herself only; hoof beats tapping down memory's inner halls, immaculation of presence through silken walls, the syncopation of steps echoing with my first soundings (*from before the beginning!*), rhyme in self's rhythm, lake late in loon light, stone in full lactation, then bore a quarter-inch hole into my frontal lobe that she might pour despair into all my soul. I was a goner and knew it.

As we crossed the street to my heap, a blast shattered sky's tranquility, smashing placidity to splintery bits. Senses dashed, both Dolly and I looked up in time to see a meteor rending north from south, fore from aft, mind from sight, heading due west. Even after breaking the sound barrier's cherry, I could still hear its flame bucking and snapping and see its inner glow, rock fierce and red, before it rocketed out, over the ocean, its edge lacerating my visual cortex; then narrowing, tightening into a small flame, a spangled blip, until finally it disappeared, as though a sentence had been passed wherein a phrase was reduced to a word, a letter, period, then not so much anything this side of certainty. *So high it might strike a thousand miles out*, I thought. *Maybe it could reach the other edge of the Pacific Rim*. Indelible each way I looked, its afterimage seemed to slice open the underbelly of my sensibilities such that all my tenderest conceptions might spill upon the wreckage which constituted the majority of my life. *Probably not a good sign*.

It seemed to take forever to get to the other side of town. Even though it was the Sunday of a holiday weekend and there was little traffic, we hit almost every other light and enough of those patrol types were about to give nearly anyone pause, especially if that anyone had his name on a few

warrants, possibly one felony. But I wasn't in a hurry, I wanted time to think, and driving was one of my favorite sites for sustained meditation, just this side of rocking on a cabin's porch, mid-river island, water on one side running deep and silent, its concave roar swallowed by dark walled interior of rock, devouring mind of inner ear, and on the other a scherzo of light and life, dace-bright dazzle dancing mid shallows, bright glitter of water's weave as trill over reed, and me between, deep in thought, rocking.

Everyone said zero is nothing, but its loss (or theft), I realized, *combined with the cortical "hyperventilation" of identity cloning, might dissolve all remaining distinctions between resemblance, similarity, and the exact, same thing, not to mention copy, replication, reflection, and bald-faced duplication. An evagination of the actual, "like" for "identity," "resembles" in lieu of "same." Existence crowding itself out of the extant as absence swirls in a caducean coil about the primed duality of brain and thing, think and is, mind and absence until all or nothing is sucked down a disappearing drain which itself no longer exists, if in fact it ever did, then "itself" dissolving, before "dissolving" diss—... My head was hurting. The iDex Revolution was bad enough, blasting a hole in the past big enough for a drunken asteroid to zip through, taking us, for instance, from the yuppie gentrification of an up-scale Olde Harbor—only eight years ago the postmodern backdrop for a panoply of artists, lovers, young professionals, designer druggists, and upscale bohemians, drawing flocks of tourists like bright, chattering birds migrating from "the less fortunate states," to admire its grace, frequent its shimmering boutiques, organic markets, origami mines, and amputation kiosks, then at night dine at the best seafood restaurants along Lower Coast Highway—to the site of abandoned civic architecture, a blip on the urban screen, another flat-line on the graph of decaying civic life, while every suburban yap's existence is made almost tolerable in shiny pods hovering just beyond the outskirts, tucked into iDex's "ChrOmOzOnes," lacking the notion that anything of consequence might come within the scope of their glaze, "pud life" call it, such that they need never consider the purpose for their existence again, or if so, only on a whim, in a game. ... But if zero gets hijacked, nothing could no longer exist, at least not in the way it always hasn't.*

*And without such absence what might become of... what?... The resultant loss of differentiation while the human stew of podheads is nearly reduced to the occlusion of what does not exist could wipe us from the biometric map while unstringing the bow of existence forever. All guesses brought me to the same leaden, head-numbing wall, There was no way to know, no way to even begin to imagine, what the loss of nothing could mean. At least that's what the Colonel thought. I remember how his face lost all elasticity when he considered its abduction the last time we met. Over three months ago. After uttering the final "zero," he seemed to drift into a state not quite here, fully there, nor in the muddled in-between. As best I could tell, he was neither present nor absent, nowhere-and-anywhere at once. It took over three minutes for the fish to swim back into his eyes, then catch a steady stream. "If something happens to nothing, the next stage of evolution could be," he muttered, "... starting all over again," a shudder rode a fatalistic shrug of his shoulders, soft and sweet; then looking down, both gloved hands on his cane's imperial jade globe, he gave final punctuation to his fears with a soft emptying of lungs. Sometimes there's too much to remember.*

Turning south onto Harbor Trace, it was a straight shot to Olde Harbor. I was there almost before I knew it. (*As always.*) I pulled into Neo-PayDay's front lot, just across from what was left of Olde Arboretum after The Change had torn it several new ones. I wanted to look the place over without alarming Dolly. "I'm just going in to grab a pack of smokes," I said, stepping out of the ragtop in what I felt was the tweediest of conditions. (An academic barge, a slobbering Yale professor who divorces his department thirty years ago all over again almost every time he opens his fat yap, a plump nude pledge serving drinks at a frat party, a joke in tortured human flesh.)

Being Sunday, Neo-PayDay's doors were shut, bolted, and locked fast. I pretended to search for something in Shepherdson's pockets so I could look about, stalling on hover. After a brief shuffle, I felt a half pack of cigarettes. *A leftie? Hmmm.* Tailor Menthols it turned out. And I hadn't even known he'd smoked. *It shows you something sometimes,* I thought. *Other times, it doesn't mean a damned thing.* I found a Bic® in the pocket as well so I tried to light one to buy a bit of time. Remembering how nicotine used to zap my

melon, its bolt tearing mind's crown down to its tender, quivering root, my hand threatened to fly off into spasmodic paroxysms (a mime's epileptic fits, a poisoned rat making its nut, mad anguished sorrow trapped in battlerut). Attempting to appear casual while looking toward the broken glass towers of The Olde Arboretum's main building, I held my right hand steady with my left and stoked up.

Everything looked normal. No sign of movement. Another deserted morning. *All the bums must be out on the job*, I thought, *whatever job that is. Odd, ... mid-holiday*. I choked over what sounded like smothered laugh, a bit more than an evangelist's hiccup, then after waiting a minute took another drag thinking of Maxine's cheek upon mine, the press of her hand and chest, and slowly exhaling, spelled out the nature of forlorn desire in clouds that caught and massed, hanging briefly before curling into shimmering torsos, phantom ropes twined with feminine grace of line, hair and hip curving to buttock, thigh against pudenda, nub of cleft, as tufts slid into broken arcs and curves, slices of scimitars, swords and fangs, shards of tits and ass, scales of dragon wings, finally disappearing into light and air, to which I gave my mind entire, *Free at last. One molecule to all others*. It had been awhile since I'd had a straight jolt of nicotine. Not since that time I woke up in the predawn next to the kid's nude body. *Dew or death sweat?* I'd wondered. *Steeple upside down*.

I shook involuntarily, then began to raise the cigarette for another hit when a faint swan swam across my limbic stream, shining upward and to the right of the arboretum's main building. *A shadow of light*. I located it in my visual cortex and turned my head slowly, trying to appear casual. On one of the sagging chrome buttresses to the east, milk yellow in the oddly diminishing light, I saw what I thought was a faint flash, almost as though it wasn't there, a reflection in ocean's depths down mind's lost caverns, wandering hopelessly within. *Nothing could do that, at least while nothing lasts*, I thought, *except the reflection from a '17 PodCaster's windshield, the kind iDex requisitions for its undercover clones. That means some of their thugs are probably hiding out behind The Olde Brick Toole Shed. If they stay where they are*, I realized, there wouldn't be a problem, *But if they pull through and spot us...* I needed

to think so took another toke.... *Damn!* The second jolt was almost as good as the first. Only this time after a quick trip to oblivion, I found myself in full battle gear, braced with an enormous pink strap-on announcing my presence with staccato neon bursts of gnarly toss, face stung by hot winds, jet skiing through the bloody slush of Mars, stitching flowers in my wake for sweet anvil's sake. "You could get addicted," I almost said aloud.

Just then the slight flash on the buttress was joined by another above, slightly to the right, over the ever-falling east tower. I knew someone had opened the car's door to get in or out unless I'd seen an afterimage of the first as I shifted my eyes to avoid the last puff which blew back toward my face. *Shit. This stuff's pretty damned all right. That's what I think.*

While I had been watching, I dimly realized the air's stillness had gradually turned into a breeze which became in short order the urgent, though as yet gentle, thrust of wind as a cloud's shadow smothered all buttress flashings under a thick gauze of shade like a curtain thrown over a naked bulb, a hood over a lantern, or a blanket over a breathless face. I looked up. One gigantic, black cloud ran from horizon to horizon, the entire mass advancing, now halfway, across the otherwise clear sky. Sin was never so deep as clouds' cast then. *Shit*, I thought. *It's gonna rain and the top won't go up. We'd better find cover fast or we'll get spritzed good.* I jogged to the car, needlessly cupping the Tailor in my hand; the breeze was not yet threatening at ground level, but some things just seemed like they needed done.

When I got to the door of my heap, I saw a highschool girl, strip-mall goth, leaning over the passenger's side of the back seat while handing a baseball hat to Dolly with a pen. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, I thought, as she gushed on about Dolly's "bitchin'-wicked chromo-strands and deox-dupes," how the difference of such absences was "almost nearly" a presence itself, given operant foregrounding of the virtual, spritely "golly-existential-gee's" poking through theory-babble as she stoked her gob with mind's sticky fingers: pod-vision to phantom prostheticology wherein reference itself disappears into metaphor's abyss, replication's reflection lost in a mirror gone stone-blind, nothing inhabiting the protean calibrations of differentials, a back room filled with torsos, the dream of stumps, and so on.

She was wearing a black blouse fringed with moth-gray lace which snapped in gusts along her wrists and neck's short nape. As she spoke, her small hands danced about her face, flashing green at finger tips. Looking closer, I realized she had painted her nails a deep emerald as the backdrop, each for a Hebrew letter, mars black, maybe a quarter-inch high in an ancient font, surly gothic. *Probably from the Kabbalah*, came to mind as I reached for the handle. *I wonder what they spell? ... "golem rites?"* I took another toke.

Bam! Alacrity's edge cresting over brainstem in swirls of worldly presence as what's-to-come was ever-here in terrifying registration for over thirteen spirit-draining seconds. Moles dying in fetal shock. A child draped over a corpse, bathed in wraith light. Planets the size of billiard balls shooting through cab's skull. Scrambled eggs burning in a Rabelaisian pan. A geodesic dome, star sparred, blossoming with inaccuracies the size of monstrous rhizomes gracing the horizon. The suicide of giants clotting the sacred way, beefy coagulants. Sheen of absence burnishing the caul of memory's warmth. But the meaning of which...?

I stopped and shook my head. The goth was still a chatter. *Christ, she's iDex skin-and-bones*, I realized. *I can pick up on 'em in nanoseconds, especially when they're decked out like this: smarmy snot-chic with sophomore angst, black back humped over, wrapped in designer derelict apparel, sneakers a miscreant bile-green. Probably from the division that specializes in 90s replicants. A poser posing as a poser. Good*, I thought. *Damned good!*

While Dolly signed her baseball cap, I tried to make small talk with the "girl" to throw her off, even though I knew iDex probably had us cold already, damned near frozen. "Hey kid," I said, "you know where's a convenience store?... I'm almost outta these," holding up the remainder of my Tailor. The wind kicked the ashes off its tip, sending them over windshield's glass, slashing them into tiny sheets above the hood. Pooft. *Flecks cut to sheer... no longer discernibly particles.*

After curtly giving directions, the girl took her hat and pen from Dolly with, I thought, a rather arch pretense of gratitude, pursing her back while smartly snapping her neck several degrees to the right. I started the car and put it in gear. *(She probably didn't like being called "kid,"* I thought. *Tough.)*

As we began pulling away she waved the hat. I gave my heap the gas. After turning right on Trace, I took the first left and onto Royal before glancing in the rearview. Dolly was waving back.

The clone was right. An iMat was open eight blocks down. *They probably loaded her with the full GeoPack*, I figured. *Must mean business. More than somebody's cookies could get spilt.* I got out. A small boy was playing in the weedy front lawn of an abandoned house across the street. A thickening trail of snot beneath his left nostril caught what was left of the waning light. *Bugger.* It hit me. *Keeps means for keeps. Sons-a-bitches!* Inside, a Polynesian clerk was straightening cans of canary relish on a shelf in the second-to-last aisle. He looked up, seemingly unsurprised to see me, or more accurately like everything was just too shockingly normal and dull for the registration of his mind much less the comment of eyes. Splay of life in everyday delirium, he gleamed with the dull burnish of those just before being caught in the thrust of a momentous, life-changing surprise. *Perfect. ... It's getting to be a bit much.*

I bought two packs of Tailors just in case (not menthol, I didn't want the nicotine blast riding waves of a cheap lounge act with a Lemony Pledge™ back) and two more Bics®. Somehow I knew I'd need them. I let the clerk keep the change. *It probably won't do either of us any good anyway*, I remember thinking as I pulled my tired carcass behind the wheel. "We're just going uptown," I said over my shoulder, heading east, "toward ProtoPlex," and turning my head, gave her a wink, "Gotta see a horse about a pig."

All the way up Royal to Simulacrum I sang, face thrust into broad sky just to give the snoops at iDex a thrill:

Gotta see a filly  
About a silly sow,  
Milk a juicy scarab,  
Squeeze a cumquat cow,  
Gonna seek a filly's argo-  
Naut now, but no, not now, or  
*Why* naught *now?*, not even when  
*Whatever's how* is wedded thus to *whenever's*

*While?* And if not *now*, well then, *when?*, while  
Whosoever's *how* sits astride each moment's prow?  
O sing O-When-O! and if not *When-O*, O why not *now?*

and so on, to the tune of Lil' Qua's "Cypha Fly." I had to make up the words because I could only remember a few snippets of the lyrics and the melody kept slipping out of my mind as well, small phrasings of notes disappeared into the interstices while melodic cobblings fell flat as wet sponges through fabric's air. I looked up. The sky had turned a deeper shade of darkness as the wind poked holes in all my hopes for stable continuity which fluttered like rags and shreds at the margins of consciousness, curtains whipped by gusts from the windows of an abandoned house or the mane of a horse in fleeing frenzy slashing its rider's face down nightmare's ever-darkening, midnight trail. The next moment the wind would briefly die before it spasmed again, and again, repeatedly, until I felt, at the boundaries of my being, a wavering of portals and heard the hush of rubble standing sentinel at the borders of outlandish territories. On, off, on, off. Dioramic tilt, tat-for-tit. (*What if we get stuck on "off" forever?* I wondered.) As though someone coughed deep within my consciousness. Or was it more like a set of sick barks as the downbeat for a lightning-round series of alternate binging and purging behaviors? *Damn*, I thought, *better get to the bottom of this fast, before the very concept of zero disappears beneath the sheer wherein nothing's little more than anything else, walls of flowers, afternoons of rain, the delicate floescence in the webbing of dimensional branes, all of which might disappear forever, as though they'd never been. Then we'll really be lost, without even the idea of here, or anywhere for that matter, much less any other. Today's PodBurg could come to look like an evangelist's heaven, his hell but a spell in an irritation chamber, fictional and flip.*

The rain began half way.

## More than One Synonym

*(For Moose Jackson)*

We are driving to see the crevasse,  
of French origin, spoken in romantic  
tongues, the place of opening,  
the scissure appearing like a wound,  
a sudden gash that never scars  
because in any given lifetime,  
it will not heal, mass, clot or coalesce.  
Deep and deeper to something beyond superlative,  
a great cleft widens, a noticeable inflection.  
The wayward oaks meant to be counted  
along the road, nearly genuflecting,  
before invisible gods,  
limbs bent, raised almost in worship,  
giving praise to the imagined,  
trunks upright or rising, rising,  
at impossible angles and unspoken parallels.  
Beneath the canopy, north and southbound,  
moss grazes, drapes in descent  
every year of a languid century.

## Near River Road's End

The trunk, wrung by silent centuries  
of epidemics and war, each hardship  
expands the girth further.

No one joins hands to measure  
what is worth calculating.

One oak of synonyms and shared circumstances  
stands unquoted, a matter of strength  
and supplication to shade  
the robber, the rapist, the arsonist,  
the extortionist, susurrant designations  
for poor choices, a matter of genetics,  
troublesome seeds, poverty, shame, aberrant lineage,  
mistakenly convicted or unbroken cycles.

A flock of ibises lands on barely leavened earth.

Nothing more will be spoken of crimes,  
impassioned or petty, prisoners...someone else's apostles  
whose tombstones face the river.

## Ex Post Facto: Rhetoric 101

*We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric,  
but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.*

—William Butler Yeats, “Anima Hominis”

From such distance, I can't remember much  
of that day except the heat—Missouri,  
mid-summer— your face—earnest, insistent,

black as a polished boot— and what  
you said when you stopped me in the hall  
after class: That I was, by virtue of being white,

a racist. *Inescapable*, you added, the word falling hard  
like a gavel. Because the goal of the course was writing  
sound arguments, I might have asked

you to turn a more careful eye on your logic,  
or to recall our week's work on enthymemes,  
how risk often lurks in an unstated premise.

But you rarely attended, and when you did,  
you sat apart in the back row, aloof, dismissive,  
a supercilious smile scribbled across your face.

New enough to teaching to be flummoxed,  
I struggled to rebut your unsupported claim,  
all the while inwardly fuming: *Have you no sense*

*of caution in dealing with your teacher?  
Who are you to betray me like this  
in front of my many contradictory selves?*

*And why do I persist in playing Peter  
to your Judas with my repeated, heated denials?  
You parried my objections with that vexing grin.*

Then, like a shrewd prosecutor suddenly resting  
his case, you spun on your heels and vanished—  
first into the hall's steady stream of students,

and then from the course itself,  
never bothering to drop. From the standpoint  
of rhetoric, a clever tactic, setting me up

like that to lose. At term's end I argued with you  
in your absence about your grade before I made you  
pay. In my head I heard you say, *Drink*

*for the rest of your days from this well  
into which I have poured my poison. I do.*

This poem is a quarrel with myself, not you,

who deserved an A.

## Contributors

**Randy Bates'** *Rings: On the Life and Family of a Southern Fighter* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux) was published to starred reviews in Publishers Weekly (“... a powerful, moving chronicle of triumph over despair . . . makes readers grasp the socioeconomic conditions that pulverize black dreams and identity.”) and Library Journal (“...more than a boxing book . . . a vivid and moving portrait of what it means to be black in America.”) and described in the New Orleans Times-Picayune as “an odyssey of self-discovery as well as quest for racial comprehension and understanding” and as follows by syndicated reviewer Richard Eder in the Los Angeles Times Book Review: “. . . extraordinary book. The effort was made out of a conviction that understanding without involvement is not only incomplete, but can easily become-a white man writing about a black family-exploitation. His book is not a tour but a journey; its end as uncertain as its departure; its passage supremely moving and revealing. . .”

Bates has taught since the 90s in the UNO MFA program, where he mentors students in the art of non-fiction writing. He has also published fiction and poetry over the years.

**Grace Bauer** is the author of four books of poems – most recently, *Nowhere All At Once*, from Stephen F. Austin State University Press, plus four chapbooks – most recently, *Café Culture*, from Imaginary Friend Press. She also co-edited (with Julie Kane) the anthology, *Unpteen Ways of Looking at a Possum: Critical & Creative Responses to Everette Maddox*. She teaches in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

**Gina Ferrara** lives in New Orleans and has several collections of poems that include: *The Size of Sparrows* (Finishing Line Press 2006) *Ethereal Avalanche* (Trembling Pillow Press 2009) *Amber Porch Light* (CW Books 2013) and her latest collection *Carville: Amid Moss and Resurrection Fern* (FLP 2014). Her poetry has appeared in *Callaloo*, *The Poetry Ireland Review*, *Valley Voices* and others. She has work forthcoming in *Louisiana Literature* and *The New Laurel Review*.

**Skip Fox** has written a number of books, including an annotated secondary bibliography (on Robert Creeley, Edward Dorn, and Robert Duncan), a series of multiple genre books (e.g., *Delta Blues*), and a selected poems (*Sheer Indefinite: Selected Poems 1991-2011*, UNO Press, 2012). He has taught at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette for over thirty-two years and lives in the country near Sunset on three acres with a log cabin and pond.

**Randall R. Freisinger's** poems have appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. He has four collections of poems: *Running Patterns* (1985 Flume Press National Chapbook Competition winner), *Hand Shadows* (Green Tower Press, 1988), *Plato's Breath* (May Swenson Poetry Prize, Utah State University Press, 1997), and *Nostalgia's Thread: Ten Poems on Norman Rockwell Paintings* (Hol Art Books, 2009). He lives in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where he is Emeritus Professor of Rhetoric, Literature, and Creative Writing in the Department of Humanities at Michigan Technological University.

**Michael Fulop** lives north of Baltimore with his wife and two children, and he works as a psychiatrist. He has previously had poems published in the *Atlanta Review*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Poet Lore*, and others.

Poet Laureate of the State of Louisiana, **Ava Leavell Haymon's** most recent poetry collection is *Eldest Daughter*, published by Louisiana State University Press. She has written three previous collections, *Why the House Is Made of Gingerbread*, *Kitchen Heat*, and *The Strict Economy of Fire*, all also from LSU Press, and edits the Barataria Poetry Series. Her poems have appeared in journals nationwide. Prizes include the *Louisiana Literature Prize* for poetry in 2003, the L.E. Phillabaum Poetry Award for 2010, the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters 2011 Award in Poetry. *Why The House Is Made Of Gingerbread* was chosen as one of the top ten poetry books of 2010 by Women's Voices for Change.

**Kathryn Jacobs** is the Editor of *The Road Not Taken: a Journal of Formal Poetry*. Her latest book, *Wedged Elephant*, will be published by Kelsey Press in June 2015. A professor at Texas A & M - C, she has four previous books, more than a dozen articles and over 170 poems published in journals like *Xavier Review*, *Measure*, *Raintown Review*, *Whiskey Island* and *Poetry South*.

**Juyanne James**'s short stories and essays have appeared in journals, such as *The Louisville Review*; *Mythium: the Journal of Contemporary Literature and Cultural Voices*; *Bayou Magazine*, and *Eleven Eleven*, and included in the anthologies *New Stories from the South 2009: The Year's Best* (Algonquin) and *Something in the Water: 20 Louisiana Stories* (Portals Press, 2011). Her essay, "Table Scraps," was a *Notable Essay of 2013 in the Best American Essays of 2014*. She was commissioned to write a story for Symphony Space's Selected Shorts Project and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize three times. Juyanne's short story collection, *The Persimmon Trail and Other Stories* (Chin Music Press), has a publication date of July 2015. She lives in New Orleans and teaches English at Our Lady of Holy Cross College.

**Jonathan Kline** has performed his stories in NYC, Chicago, Seattle, New Orleans, Dublin and Cork Ireland. His poems have been published in *Tribes Magazine*, *Big Bridge*, *Yawp*, *Cocktail*, and *The Maple Leaf Rag*. CDs of his performance monologues include *Conceptual Cowboy Yodeling*, produced by H.O.M.E. Studio and *Stories My Mother Told Me Never to Tell* produced by Puppethead Productions. He has been a visiting artist at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Tulane University, New Orleans Center for Creative Art. In 2011 he was awarded a residency by the Santa Fe Art Institute. *The Wisdom of Ashes*, a short novel, was released by Lavender Ink September 11, 2013.

**Mona T. Lydon-Rochelle** has published her first chapbook *Mourning Dove* (Finishing Line Press, 2014). Her poems have appeared in *Floating Bridge Review*, *About Place Journal*, *Journal of Medical Humanities* (forthcoming) and *Sante Fe Literary Journal* (forthcoming). She volunteers for *Médecins Sans Frontières* and previously served as a professor at the University of Washington and University of College Cork Ireland. She lives on Bainbridge Island with her husband.

**Elizabeth Rosen**'s short stories have most recently appeared in *Referential Magazine*, *Bellow Literary Journal*, *Revolver*, and the anthology *Best Short Stories from the Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest, 2014*. She is a former children's television writer and a current academic who has published numerous scholarly articles and a book on contemporary apocalyptic fiction and film called *Apocalyptic Transformations: Apocalypse*

*and the Postmodern Imagination.*

**Ed Ruzicka** has published one full length volume, “Engines of Belief - Engagement in Modern Art” (Abenbook, 2014). He appears in the recently released anthology *Maple Leaf Rag, Volume 5*. Ruzicka was a finalist for the Dana Poetry Award and has appeared in *Plainsongs*, the *Atlanta Review* and other literary journals. Ed lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and is an occupational therapist. More works can be found on his website, [edrpoet.com](http://edrpoet.com).

**Randolph Thomas** is the author of *Dispensations*, a collection of short stories from New Rivers Press, and *The Deepest Room*, a collection of poems from Silverfish Review Press. He teaches at LSU in Baton Rouge.

**Daniel Webre** has an MFA in fiction from McNeese State University and is currently working on a PhD in English with creative writing concentration at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. His short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fiction Weekly*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *The Louisiana Review*, and *The Flint Hills Review*.

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