



Guidance Quar Switchback

Intuition vs. Logic

Issue 13, vol 7

Switchback

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interviews

St. Montgomery Clift: An Interview with Noël Alumit

C. Adán Cabrera

Noël Alumit's first novel, *Letters to Montgomery Clift*, relates the story of Bong Bong "Bob" Luwad. A series of circumstances - the beating and "disappearance" of his political activist father and the violence perpetrated against his mother - prompt seven-year-old Bong Bong's voyage to Los Angeles to escape the horrors being waged upon the Philippines by the Marcos regime. Once in the United States, Bong Bong begins writing to his own personal saint, at the behest of his guardian, Auntie Yuna: "Praying is not enough," she claims. "Better to put it on paper. Especially in America... Letters are solid proof to the saints, to our ancestors that what I was praying just don't disappear. There are too many prayers floating around. They get tangled up like balloon strings. The spirits don't know which string belongs to which balloon." Bong Bong longs to reunite with his parents, but soon realizes he needs divine assistance and begins writing to his personal saint. Bong Bong's saintly choice, you ask? Troubled, bisexual, and long-deceased Hollywood film star Montgomery Clift.

Switchback caught up with Noël at a Los Angeles café on a cloudless Saturday afternoon.

Switchback: Noël, thanks so much for taking the time to sit down with us today. Religion and faith play a major role in your novel.

What role does religion and/or spirituality play in your own life?

Noël Alumit: Well, I'm a practicing Buddhist. Meditation has been particularly helpful to me. It quiets the mind. As a novelist with a million things running through my head, this spiritual tool has been most helpful in keeping me sane.

SB: Writing plays such an important part in Bong Bong's life, most obviously in the form of epistles to his love, Montgomery Clift. What role does literature and writing play in your own life?

Noël: Books are my way of connecting to the world. When I first started to write, I was recommended a book by the Arab writer, Abdellah Taia. Through his book, I felt connected to the Arab world in a way that I hadn't previously explored. I still very much think of literature as serving in this regard. Consider, for example, the Chinese writer and recent Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo. Because of his writing, the corruption of the Chinese government is being exposed. In this regard, not only are books important, but writers are, too. Becoming a writer is a very brave thing to do.

SB: Why become a writer, then?

Noël: Well, as I said, the decision to become a writer takes courage. Along with the financial difficulties there's also all the psychological burdens put upon us. It's incredibly taxing to see a novel, a story, a poem through to completion. To choose this life, and to dedicate it to creativity takes courage and is a noble thing to do. I write because I feel I have something to offer the world, and unlike acting where you have to wait for someone's permission to take the stage, you can write all day, every day.

SB: Given your take on living a literary life, how did your family react when you told them that you wanted to be a writer?

Noël: You know, I'm thankful that they were supportive. My family's big enough to "absorb" the idea of there being a creative type among my siblings. In fact, I'm here because of my family. They gave me the foundation I needed to develop the confidence to be a creative person.

SB: We'd like to turn now to the novel itself. In some ways it's a classic bildungsroman, in that you trace Bong Bong's coming of age as a gay Filipino in the Los Angeles of the 1970s and 1980s. Before we dig deeper, can we ask what the inspiration was for *Letters to Montgomery Clift*?

Noël: There was no Filipino person one that wasn't impacted by the Marcos regime [ca. 1972-1981], especially when you ask any Filipino born after 1965. I wanted to talk about this dark time in our history, but I also wanted to touch on other cultural aspects related to the Philippines. I was raised having a strong connection to my dead ancestors, for example, a topic that I tackle in my book. I also wanted to explore queer Asian identity in a way that hadn't really been done before.

SB: And the crux of the novel, namely your use of the long-dead movie star Montgomery Clift?

Noël: (laughs) Well, much like Bong Bong, I, too, have been a huge Montgomery Clift fan since I was a little boy, though I'm not as big as a fanatic as he is, that's for sure!

SB: A lot of our readers are emerging writers and MFA students who are perhaps working on their own book-length projects. Can you tell us more about your process of writing the novel?

Noël: It took me eight years - on and off - to write *Letters to Montgomery Clift*. During those eight years, my book looked much different than it does today. For starters, in terms of structure I had intended for my novel to be completely epistolary in nature, à la *The Color Purple*. As it wound its way through the publication process, it was suggested that I turn it into the more

standard, narrative format that it takes today. It just flowed better, it seemed, and I was open to this suggestion.

SB: What obstacles did you encounter while writing your book?

Noël: I was miserable at times while I worked on the production of each scene. It was difficult to get to the point where I didn't care about what the outside world thought and was free to just write. This is when my family and literary community were absolutely indispensable. They helped me see that yes, finishing my novel was possible.

SB: *Letters to Montgomery Clift* deals with some pretty heavy issues: race relations, torture, the immigrant experience, and coming out, just to name a few. How was the book received when you finally did publish it? In particular, how did the Filipino-American community react?

Noël: The reception was overwhelmingly positive, both by the LGBTQ and Asian/Pacific Islander communities. Young Filipinos who had no previous knowledge about the Marcos regime came up to me and thanked me for giving these issues a space in literature and for sparking dialogue in their communities. Interestingly enough, my mother still shushes me whenever I bring up the Marcos regime. She still seems to think that mentioning the Marcoses in public can cause a lot of trouble.

SB: In some ways, would you say that *Letters to Montgomery Clift* is a cathartic novel for you?

Noël: In some ways, yes. I looked at writing this novel as a challenge to myself. I was trained as an actor, and being a writer seemed impossible to me. Psychologically-speaking, writing a novel that has been well-received as commercially successful did wonders for my artistic confidence. I gave myself permission to write about controversial things.

SB: How do you manage articulating these controversial things in your work?

Noël: In some ways, I'm still figuring it out. I depend on a rich and varied test audience to tell me what needs more development, and what needs less. I liken this to the discipline a painter must show in his or her art: sometimes the oeuvre needs a few more brushstrokes of red, sometimes it needs a heavy dabbing. I figure it out as I go along.

SB: Noël, thank you so much for this fascinating conversation. As a closing thought, what advice would you give emerging young writers?

Noël: Find that story that you and *only* you can tell. What stories do you have to tell? I also want to stress the importance of

establishing a literary community. This community has been vital to my development as a writer, and I highly encourage any serious writer to establish his/her support network as soon as possible, both for the emotional support we need as writers, but also for readers. And on this note: pick varied, trusted readers. Some of the best readers in my writing group have a life experience way different from my own. Be careful who you lock out.

Noël Alunit is the author of *Letters to Montgomery Clift* and the Los Angeles Times bestseller *Talking to the Moon*. His work has also appeared in *Tilting the Continent*, *DisOrient*, *TakeOut*, and *Subterraneans*, as well as *The Huffington Post*. Among his many accolades, Noël was awarded an Emerging Voices Fellowship from PEN Center USA West. *Letters to Montgomery Clift* also garnered him a prestigious Stonewall Book Award for literature in 2003. Noël earned a bachelor of fine arts in drama from the University of Southern California and has also studied playwriting at the David Hwang Writers' Institute at East West Players. Follow Noël at <http://thelastnoel.blogspot.com/>

reviews

Review of *Culture of One* by Alice Notley

By Patrick James Dunagan

Hecate is the bestower of "luck," associated with the underworld, the moon and "crossroads." She is "She who works her Will." I interpret her symbolism as the representation of female instinct and intuition, the guide that can help one choose the best direction (at a metaphorical crossroad) via the gifts of the unconscious. She can come as dreams that reveal what is hidden from conscious thought. Hecate is the carrier of torches in the dark and the guider of transformation.

-- Hoa Nguyen, "An Interview," Evening Will Come: A

Monthly Journal of Poetics

Only one person at a time says it, even if, as at the beginning of the world it is the myth made up by everyone.

-- Alice Notley, "Women & Poetry" Coming After: Essays

Alongside poets such as John Ashbery, Bernadette Mayer, and Joanne Kyger, Alice Notley resides in the top tier of greatest living North American poets consistently worth reading to this day. Her work refuses to meet expectations— to plateau out in some kind of boringly predictive Stevensian grace as "the Tradition" encourages all believe the fate of the elder to be. In ever-changing fashion her poems consistently challenge, arriving full of vigor and unrelenting in demands made upon the reader. It has become more and more evident that her writing continues to evolve not just because she'd be bored with her work otherwise, but because the work demands her allegiance remain to the writing first and foremost. This doesn't always make for easily enjoyable poetry.

Her latest published collections, such as *Alma; or the Dead Women* (Granary, 2006) and *Reason and Other Women* (Chax, 2010), prove extremely trying at times, offering few easily recognizable points of connection to what just may be happening or where the writing is going. Words, lines, and any sense of her using poetic 'forms' appears fragmentary, broken off mid-thought, and undeveloped fully. There is cohesion, ultimately, but reading through these works from cover to cover is a rather grueling task for even the most shit-happy reader. For those who are not likely to bother with these more grueling texts, Notley's latest publication *Culture of One* allows for a different display of her interests and the considerable dexterity of her practice.

In many ways, *Culture of One* is one of Notley's most accessible books, imminently more readable by a much wider audience than the recent others mentioned above. The book is quite novel-like, possessing a clear set of characters and events which move along in a more or less plot-like structure, similar at least superficially to recent video games and the resultant films they get turned into. In a recent interview posted on-line at *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics*, poet Hoa Nguyen addresses the narrative drive in her own work as an expansion of what she originally finds in Notley. She speaks of having found herself brought into the position of needing to "reevaluate my relationship to narrative in my poems and understand, differently, what Notley is after when she speaks of stealing story from the novel and putting it back into poetry where it originated." Nguyen goes on to cite Notley's statement: "What a service to poetry it might be to steal story away from the novel & give it back to rhythm & sound, give it back to the line."

With *Culture of One* Notley achieves just such a result. The poems demonstrate the skill of a virtuoso alchemist of the experimental line easily dropping any obtuseness of expected poeticizing with a refreshingly cavalier demeanor. At points this work confounds with its basically narrative impulse but it's clear throughout that Notley remains one with the poem underhand. Readers familiar with Notley will find a furthering of interests from her previous writings that is both new and worthwhile without being overly burdened, while those readers unfamiliar will not find the writing as off putting as they might some of her other collections.

Finding variety in her own writing is nothing new or objectionable to Notley herself. In her essay, "Thinking and Poetry," from her collection of essays *Coming After*, she declares, "I find being a poet something that must start again all the time; I'm always reinventing my practice, discovering what I believe is true and how to express it." While *Culture of One* turns away somewhat from concerns shown in her other latest published works, it remains in many ways a return to, or at least a continued exploration of, concerns first appearing within her previous collections published by Penguin beginning with *The Descent of Allete*, continuing with *Mysteries of Small Houses and Disobedience*.

Such a return is not at all surprising since all of Notley's later books are cantos of a Whole; one long Poem which comprises her mature writing life. She seems always to be writing and it is always in the form of a long connected sequence(s) strongly defying any chronological reasoning. "Allete" for instance first makes appearance in poems near the end of Houses, yet Houses was published after Allete. Her composition practice arises from out her inner psychological/emotional states and is threaded along her memory/vision of life. It is intensely autobiographical at core but not limited to Notley's own specific experience or for that matter any other individual perspective. The chorus of voices is that which is heard and demanded for by the poem. Notley as poet is only the venue into which the words flow and through which they arrive to the world of her readers.

Recently, poet Zoe Skoulding, in her critical article "Alice Notley's Disobedient Cities" published in the *Feminist Review*, describes Notley's writing practice as one of "exploration not only of literary space but also of the material and political spaces with which it is imbricated." Such exploration continues with *Culture* while being further expanded. As Skoulding notes, the earlier works take place in cities and share a "motif of descent" which is not quite the case here where the only descent is one taken by the poet herself prior to commencing to write. Notley is engaging her own imaginings of a remembered place and time that is both factual as well as not.

Notley undergoes a descent into the folds between her conscious and unconscious states in order to write. I recall watching a video recording made of a community writing workshop she gave in San Francisco shortly around the time of *Houses* appearing and she encouraged participants to try such a practice, imagining digging a pit into which to lie one's self down in the dark and therein greet whatever poem is to be found. The peculiar tale told in *Culture of One* arises from out such darkness. It tells the various stories of "Marie" (very much a Hecate-like figure) and her dogs living in the town dump of a small desert community which is vaguely situated sometime in an American southwest of the 60s or 70s, but could just as easily be the 90s, and unfolds within a dreamy but nonetheless hard, precise realism.

As the poems progress, Marie's own story opens to intervening tales of the other community members with whom she has contact: from the pack of teenage girls who play at being Satanists and terrorizing each other as much as Marie, to an aspiring young rock star on the way down, due to drugs, as she rises to Fame, as well as a local shopkeeper who serves as stand-in suitor to Marie, amongst others. This is a poem of imagined memory which defies any conventional restrictions or expectations. One way to describe the imagery behind its narrative drive would be a series of inter-connected dreams derived from too much over-exposure to B-movie exploitation horror films shot on back lots of the 70s. The grime is everywhere and the poems are embedded within it.

While on one hand there certainly isn't much in the way of fun and good times to be found here, a sense of necessity is pervasive. This is a story that requires being told. Notley is very clear that she writes poems for the sake of the poems and not herself. As she states (again, in her essay "Thinking and Poetry"), "In the face of what must be said, does it ever matter if one says, 'i' or not, if one tells a story or not, if one uses certain forms or not? Say what must be said." In *Culture of One*, as she has been consistently for these last several years of writing, Notley holds true to her impulses, maintaining a drive of living the writing as it presents itself to her. When things get difficult they remain difficult. Pride does not come into it and neither does pity. Like Jack Spicer writes to Lorca, "Words are what sticks to the real." Without much fanfare or concern for what may come, *Culture of One* offers a meaty and firm grasp a hold of the real.

Culture of One by Alice Notley

Penguin, 2011

ISBN 978-0-14-311893-0

\$18.00, 142 pgs

Review of *Normally Special* by xTx

By Ben Loory

Last week I had to have some bloodwork done. NEVERMIND WHY, IT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS. So I looked around the house for a book to take with me and settled on *Normally Special*. It's small, you see, only 96 pages, and designed to fit in your pocket. It's the first full-length collection from xTx, and the first publication from Tiny Hardcore Press.

I got in the car and drove to the testing facility, signed in and sat down to wait. I opened the book and read the first few stories. I hit "The Art of Folding Towels" and needed Kleenex.

By the time the phlebotomist called me in, about twenty-five minutes later, I was in such an incredibly agitated state, I didn't even want to think about my blood pressure.

The phlebotomist was a nice little lady who spoke in an exotic accent.

Do you have a fear of needles? she said.

No, I said, suddenly growing terrified.

I went through a period many years ago where I became well-acquainted with needles. After a while, the fear wore off. But now it was back with a rush.

The lady smacked my arms—first one, then the other.

This one, she finally said.

She swabbed a spot with alcohol and uncapped the needle.

DON'T LOOK! DON'T LOOK! my brain said.

I looked down at the cover of *Normally Special*, which I was clutching tightly in my other hand.

On the cover there's a little girl, looking lost. And a man in black pants and a red shirt.

THAT SHIRT LOOKS LIKE BLOOD, my brain said very loudly.

Oops, I heard the lady say.

And then I looked at my arm just in time to see the needle come tearing out of the vein.

Oh, I said, as the blood sprayed into the air, arced across the wall, up to the ceiling.

The lady was screaming and waving her little hands.

Blood! she said, as it came raining down.

PROTECT THE BOOK! said a voice in my head. PROTECT THE BOOK! PROTECT IT!

But then of course it was much too late as the whole room was covered in red.

Well, I said, as my vision cleared, what now? What happens next?

And then I was standing before a table at a reading, and xTx was looking up at me.

Do you want me to sign that? I think she said, looking at the bloody, dripping book.

No, I said. Well, yes, I do. I'm sorry. I don't know what happened.

But xTx didn't say another word, she just reached out for the book. As she took it in her hands, she opened her mouth. She licked the blood away with her tongue.

Oh, I said, you don't have to do that.

Yes, but I want to, she said.

And then, as I watched, letters started to form.

xTx gleamed brightly in the gore.

So, yeah, that's it: 23 semi-psychotic accounts of the horrors inside spilling out into the world. But, then again, not just the horrors; also the love and compassion. And, above all, the near-saintly need to somehow—anyhow—make everything right again.

Normally Special by xTx

Tiny Hardcore Press, 2011

ISBN13: 9780982469767

\$9.99, 96 pgs

nonfiction

On Coffee and Kentridge

By Molly Prentiss

I am obsessed with William Kentridge because William Kentridge is obsessed with coffee. He hasn't told me this directly, but it comes through in his artwork. His espresso cup is his telescope, for example, and then his mocha machine his rocket ship. His saucer is his moon. He uses the word *percolate* to talk about the formation of ideas. Then he called the blank page an antagonist, and I knew we were kindred. More than kindred: I wanted to have his babies. Our babies would have the best ideas, I thought while sipping on my own soy latte on a particularly good feeling morning when the wind was fretting about something but not taking it out on me. I was in the back yard of a good café and I let the fantasy have its way with me. My Kentridge babies would be cultured and long-nosed and fat. They would be the protagonists in the minimalist theater that was the blank page of our lives. They would be fed their milk in espresso cups, have mobiles made of negative space, clothes of cut up paper. My Kentridge babies, little fragments of new narrative, would *percolate* their way through the world.

It turned out that this good feeling morning was a morning of good ideas. My next idea, after the one about me and Kentridge producing offspring, was to try to remember every cup of coffee I had consumed in my entire life. Good idea, I thought to myself, because when I was drinking coffee in a back garden somewhere and the sun was smooching on me and the wind was feeling me up, I always thought my ideas were good.

I scribbled some things in my Moleskine. I wrote a note to Piero, because Piero gave me my first cup of coffee ever. Everyone was named Piero in those days, but this Piero was special because he gave me my first. I remembered the classrooms with columns, the chandeliers, the espresso makers fritzing in the marble hallways. Thanks, Piero, I wrote, you gave me my first. Thanks Piero, you got me hooked. You threw out a fish line and the bait was this tiny espresso cup and then I was at your feet each morning, begging for more. The second cup of coffee was my best friend's first cup, and I did like a momma bird does: put some in my mouth and gave it to the best friend like I was spitting up. Yum, she said. Super good first sip. I was proud to have shared something because sharing something is always honorable and sharing something with a best friend means love.

The third cup was with S. at one of those classy places where they make a leaf in your drink with the milk foam. This was when we were learning the hierarchy of cafés and also the hierarchy of words. And S. told me: lets do the kind of work that is not for *work* work but for *lungs* work -- and she was so refreshingly sincere that the coffee tasted smoother and more confident. The fourth and fifth and sixth cups were with my father and those cups were all about patience and learning to draw. And the million cups with my mother were so bright and agro I felt like the world was growing inside of me and then crumbling because I wanted so much of it and the cups with my sisters were charged with the electrical current that runs between bodies that know each other and the year's worth of cups with my new lover were paired with the fireworks of new love and those cups rocket-shipped to the heart.

After that there were too many cups to count. At the café table, my mind spiraled outward and I closed my Moleskine; I was disgusted with my inability to sufficiently record my thoughts in words. If I could bottle all the coffees I've ever had into one bottle, I thought, that bottle would have a bottleneck the size of an ancient sea. And convening at that bottleneck would be all the people I had ever drank coffee with, sitting in rowboats painted green or orange, taking sips from ceramic cups of all sizes. The Italians would be there with their pinkies in the air; their cups so small you feared they'd finish them too fast, that you wouldn't have enough time to talk. The Argentines would be there, trying to be like the Italians but, insecure, would have accidentally let the water run too long through their coffee grinds and ended up with a thin, bitter liquid that they'd abandon for an equally thin pastry shaped like a crescent moon. The Chileans would be there with their Nescafe and the Mexicans with their café con leche and the French with their French press and the Turkish with all that shit in their teeth from the grime of the grinds, which was actually quite charming, considering they were used to it. Then there would be my American friends, trying to steady themselves in their rickety boats, taking notes about the exotic nature of said rickety boats in their own Moleskines while sipping on grande extra hot things that cost four ninety five because of the possibility that they were organic. At that moment, bobbing on a green sea with boat loads of café memories, I would begin to think that everything is everything else and that I love everything a whole lot and equally.

You see, I drink coffee to see the whole world drinking coffee: to remember that we are all in something together. Because upon the first sip, we're all equals. We're all tap dancing with the jitters, we've each unfolded our newspaper like a map, and we're ready to zoom around a bit, see who else is up at this hour, check out each other's brews. But here's the catch: without the coffee you can't see all the others drinking coffee, because the only way you can know that the whole world is having a cup, the only possible way you can begin to see something that huge, that broad, that universal; the only way you can turn your sympathy into empathy and your microcosm into a macro one, is with the fantastic mental surge that comes with coffee, that cosmic caffeinated moment where the firsts and lasts come together, where the bottleneck of the ancient sea breaks and the rowboats are sailing in unison gracefully, where your coffee cup

morphs into a beating heart and your saucer is the same as a moon, where all the Pieros bleed into one and all the newspaper maps lead to the same place, and I'm not trying to get all fair trade on you now but where the importance of process and justice begins to matter and you *see* it mattering because in your big caffeinated moment you're understanding where that coffee *came from*, all those ethical/moral/socially responsible issues like how much did that coffee picker make off your cup and it was probably not enough and you will try to fix this through your creative practice and through your own awareness and avid attention...

but then with the fade of the jolt of the caffeinated frenzy you drop back into your spot at this one particular round table at this one particular café. Kentridge, you remember, said that although he had *hoped* to escape the confines of his studio through the telescope of his espresso cup, he had actually ended up still stuck inside it, looking out through the window of the rocket ship, staring at a sheet of black paper pinned to the studio wall.

In the end, Kentridge and I are cuddling on a Sunday morning, waking up from our respective percolating dreams. He sighs, turning away from me sadly. I don't deserve to be an artist, he says to the universe, because everything he says is to the universe. I am saddened by his lack of confidence, because nothing is sadder than a lack of confidence in someone you love. But then I remember something hopeful. Then let's drink coffee, I whisper into his big old ear, knowing he will understand what I mean to say, which is that coffee is the same as art.

poetry

[Cowboy, don't ...]

By Aaron Shurin

Cowboy, don't eat me. Yes I'm tasty, yes I've come from my warren stuffed like a Christmas goose, tongue lolling. But cowboy, think of my varnished nose, my bucket of pink gums, the opera of my eyes. Let the knotted grid loosen, let your hard silhouette overflow — alluvial redemption — let me slink away soundlessly into the lavender hills — sanctuary caravan — cowboy, don't eat me, go for the calf over there, tender as cactus jelly. I'm *too* sweet and *too* fat, my innards are frescoes of hormone spikes and acid splats — *mucho* digestive scrabble — don't open me to the scouring winds, please, close your paring knife, your dripping cowboy lips... Life is episodic and a revolution idles, there behind the pink escarpment where my pack is gathering now... The world, *este mundo immenso*, gyrates and kicks, and the hot stars *in their pale ignition* are burning... burning...

Weeding

By Elizabeth McDonnell

Weeding

— after Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge
I.

The space between decorum and desire contracts and expands.

As a birthday present I give her a necklace charmed with an antique typewriter key, the letter that starts her first name.

Gestures follow their own logic, like a tree explaining the wind's movement, embodying what's not visible.

When she wears it, I conjure the event as union, my searching handed over into her possession.

Foregrounded without intention, I am free to wander the expanse that separates and defines us, to stitch a path to my notion of togetherness.

The air wells with remote circumstance or other impediments, bodies obstructing the line of vision.

At the movies she shares my flask, but our wants do not otherwise overlap.

II.

I remember feeling humiliated for my mother as she served party favors to the other woman.

"All things happen for a reason" is logic I will not debate, as reasons are logarithmic, populating every field of loss.

A stranger's intrusion breaches our group identity, like cold water washed over feet.

Conversation turns sweet when I crave salt, a momentary double vision.

I mean this in the largest sense, where an event deposits its residual opposite; what could have transpired and does in your parallel, folded selfhoods.

The ethics of consequence swarm around betrayal, a halo thick but permeable.

Scenarios exist in time as what does not manifest.

My mother's pain recedes under an adult comprehension of what will and will not destroy you.

She rests a hand over my appetite: sand in a bite of meat.

We make eye contact.

echo's vigil

By Elizabeth McDonnell

echo's vigil

to begin with, there's the body of her beloved, carefully observed from a distance — her perch on a nearby rock. gradually, her restlessness foregrounds — jaw sore from too much gum chewing; sacrum shifting and re-shifting over stone

wait it out, kid — a disembodied voice from a movie — affectionately paternal — loops in the background. what movie was that? the beloved folded letter side in, back bent, knees tucked, head at the water. long locks of hope tangled in hair. the long sleep that is hope. yearning

the beloved yearning—

out, kid, she hiccups, trying to hurry things along. psychobabble in her head — *you won't find love if you don't love yourself*. but if you love yourself too much? *don't love yourself*. body of you my beloved back to me. pelvic blades gnawed by rock.

love

your

(then she fell asleep. and woke
again moments later

letter #1

much absurd to watch you play
out yearning, head dunked deep in

the water ripples its farthest ring
to me I greet it, just a fingertip
hastens a return wave

back to you

walk away now, pretty
slanted
car in the driveway

black night. her muscles ache, her body unseen and stiff in the hospital chair. awful movie playing on the television in the waiting room. one lover sacrifices, one lover dies. somewhere into a long scene between the two leads, the musical score resumes – the audiences cue to feel something. if the story itself isn't enough why try to resuscitate it with an orchestra.

letter #2

this afternoon
under the maple tree

noisy mess of us
your voice
stepping over my own

brittle leaves.
what
I can't tell

if you care
would you
listen

though you just
you always
assume
you do you
do not know yourself as
well
as you'd like to
think about it

inevitably one relinquishes waiting. she can't spend all of her days at the side of a lost cause without losing it herself. if she decides to live, if she gets up and leaves, a part of her won't follow. if she stays, that same part slips away. she'll always hear its tread, she'll know it follows close, but nothing can call it back to her flesh

letter #3

in one version of the myth, we never met. while you were going stiff over your reflection, I sang: the woods, flowers on the path, aflutter. I was a happy virgin. to think people actually believe you broke my heart!

then pan ripped me to pieces

we have one thing in common: no one
can fucking leave a virgin alone

out of a dark theater into the bright almost white of midday. the story threads into her lone footsteps and passers by. the film's cool palette and the drafty theater recede under the glare of this real day. all around her beauty keeps frowning, surfacing and re-surfacing like it needs more and more air.

something could have been different. what did most of them want but to tuck her into their shadows, into the air at the small of their backs? mean trick of a beautiful sheen, the thought gnaws, weaving traffic into the narrative seam so that if they turned, she'd have to turn with them.

letter #4

to wake in the bare
bruise of your name

STATION

By Aaron Shurin

Sat in front of the window box speckled with narration — cotyledon turbine, etc. — looking for a twitch in the soil — pattern repository — or the periscope of morning... Made a new city, then, a jumble of colored houses down a hillside — to stand up and go out and walk along — in another tongue, resistant, fertile, florid idiom — clustered torches — flash... Talked, then, hammered by stuttering silences but mouthing thick consonants like fresh bread, a distant calculus of yeast and sound — listened from the trembling core *the mute still air* stirred — template drift — generation — as if of spring... speaking...

Heliotropes

By Nicholas Leaskou

all are clear, I alone am clouded
Lao Tzu

HELIOTROPES

darkness gives birth to light
Carl Jung

To Whom Might Jump

The Golden Gate—

lost wonder
for those

jumping
toward
darkness

still find
the sun
hidden

tempting
yellow
inside

finds you
raw

bruised

in blood-
light

Untitled Portrait

orange, part
cinnamon

tears
keep our
boat afloat—

change *pain*
disrupt center

change course

cadence
less color

more north

To Winter Lovers

Sun
or moon
we were not

Cadmium leaves
mix with
web & earth

Neither
can stabilize
our path

Dear soldier,

red horse
rides
between us

takes, gives
pushes, pulls

The Loitering Peacock

twice
trespassed
in recurring dream:

weather balloon
or ufo
stuck in poplar tree?

wake up
the party fell

on a dim stage
why

continue to strut
your greenish
blues

To The Showman Of Vegas

A shaman wanders
on dry riverbeds

Summer snowflakes
were too political?

Poached rainforests
cost votes—
in

being
not

acting
the part

Midsummer

bathed in
sulfur & mercury
unbound

we separate
rejoice, rejoin

upside
down

wingless
syphilitic

angels
pluck
wounds

blood becomes milk

To The Half-Mourning Mother

If divinity makes marvel
then why not
turn
your widow's hue
into thistle?

*...open
combat*

wisteria, cerise
lavender

*harms
another...*

Peel
away
winter—

Inner Music

a discrete or
continuous sequence
of measurable events
distributed in time

Charles Olson

enter an arrangement
thankful for the message

all order is measure

to fathom time

sound it

as on
an instrument

nautilus

chambered

wind tunnel

To The Yielding

toxic
petal

violin

consumed
cello

hyaline
prelude

firearm

common
wound

Upper / Lower

Bach's organ
On the Headlands

Through wet
Glass

In the sky
A thousand branches

Of cypress
Listen in

Corwin St. Garden
A salamander

Stares at his
Rare shadow

On my thumb
Sliced by yucca

Earfuls of
Satie's *Vexations*

To A Will Tending

*

Swing
in an empty
playground

*

Mandrake root
kicks up
soil, we surface

*

Iced over, bodiless
laughter

fiction

Actuarial

By Dean Kisling

Lecture: "Actuarial Science analyzes statistics with mathematical models to determine probabilities. Probabilities only function meaningfully on a scale large enough to successfully absorb individual anomalies. What is an anomaly? *An* means *one*. An anomaly is the one thing that actually happens. It is what actually happens to you or me and nobody knows what that will be. It is entirely unpredictable. Entirely. If you want to know what will happen to you, you should consult a fortune teller (pause for predicted displays of servile student amusement). If you want to know why it will happen you are in the wrong classroom, although I do not know what the right one for you would be (pause). Actuarial Science is not about what will happen to you or when it will happen or why it will happen. It is about rigging the game so *the house* wins more often than it loses."

John Smith Esq. died on the courthouse steps on his way to file papers in an inheritance dispute. He was late for his appointment and was checking his papers as he climbed the steps. A man coming down the steps was trying to read a text message on his cell phone. The man bumped into John Smith, causing a (very important, original, signed, witnessed) document to start slipping from his attaché case. John Smith lurched to his left, stumbled and fell forward into Ellen Sings at Night. Ellen Sings at Night was coming down the steps with an attaché case in her left hand. In her right hand was a ceremonial pipe that had belonged to her great-great-grandfather. As she fell backward, she swung her attaché case behind her to break her fall and held the pipe out in front of her to protect it from damage. The pipe was wrapped in deerskin and the stem end stuck out slightly. Instead of putting out his hand to break his fall, John Smith clutched his papers to his chest to secure them. When he fell on top of Ellen Sings at Night the pipe stem penetrated through his left eye into his brain, killing him instantly. Ellen Sings at Night was bruised painfully by the granite steps. The (original, signed, witnessed) document blew away and was picked up several hours later by a bicycle messenger who used it to scrape dog crap off his shoe.

What were the chances of that happening, that one thing and not something else? The chances—at least by retrospective logic—were 100 percent. John Smith became dead by a complex sequence of seemingly random and unconnected events. Nobody could have predicted it but he was, nevertheless, absolutely dead. And his own final act was an acquired reaction meant to protect what he had come to value and thereby protect himself. And what could you say about that reaction except... it had apparently worked just fine until it didn't.

Lecture: "Do not suppose it is ever about anything but profit, which we measure in dollars. Do not look for morality or justice or the illusion that you are somehow bettering human society. Do not suppose Actuarial Science is about the cold, hard facts. The cold, hard facts only exist after something has happened and it is too late to do anything about it. Actuarial Science is not about making guesses, although you will make guesses every day. You will make guesses by analyzing the flawed guesses, incomplete data, misleading statistics, superstitious beliefs and outright lies compiled by other people. Your job, as a practitioner of Actuarial Science, is not to predict what will happen. You are not a fortune teller. Your job is to rig the game so the house wins more than it loses."

There were many witnesses to John Smith's death. One claimed John Smith had assaulted Ellen Sings at Night and she had merely defended herself. Another claimed Ellen Sings at Night had attacked John Smith deliberately and asked whether they had searched her for explosives and automatic weapons. Even though her hair was braided in American Indian style, she looked like an Arab. The man with the cell phone had managed to read his text message while John Smith was dying, and tried to walk away from the incident. He was detained by a policewoman who was standing at the bottom of the courthouse steps and had observed the event. The majority of witnesses stated that it looked like an unfortunate accident, just one of those things.

Ellen Sings at Night answered many questions, declined medical treatment and inquired about the pipe. She was told the pipe would be released to her in due course, once the investigative protocols demanded by this unusual event had been completed. John Smith was hauled away with the pipe still stuck in his head.

Lecture: "Profit is measured in dollars, that is, a dollar sign with a number after it. The word *trade* implies one thing is exchanged for another thing of similar value. There is no profit in that. Actuarial Science is not about *trade* or *commerce* or *free markets* or *supply and demand* or *gross national product* or any other such elusive concepts that *economists* entertain themselves with (pause). The most efficient way to acquire profit is to deal with the dollars as directly as possible. I give you five dollars, you give me four dollars back, you make a profit. This is why the vast majority of career opportunities in Actuarial Science are in the insurance and financial sectors. These businesses strive to minimize their involvement with the inefficiencies of producing goods and services. Currency *traders* [sic] are the most efficient of all. They produce no goods or services whatsoever, only profit (pause) or loss (pause). In modern society these kinds of businesses constitute the house. They will hire you to help rig the game in their favor. You are here to learn how to do that."

James Smith was notified of his father's accident and requested to identify the remains. Ellen Sings at Night was notified she could retrieve her pipe. As it happened (the coroner wanted to get these things done and go home), they arrived at the coroner's office at the same time.

Ellen: "I'm here about the pipe."

Coroner: "You are Ellen... Sings at Night?"

James: "You're the one who...?"

Ellen: "Well, you could say it was my great-great-grandfather."

Coroner: "And you are...?"

James: "The... James Smith. His son."

Coroner: "May I see some identification?"

Coroner: "I'm sorry. Both of you please."

James: (showing his ID) "Why could you say that?"

Ellen: (showing her ID) "It's his pipe. He died in 1889."

James: "What did he die of?"

Ellen: "He was lynched by a white rancher for stealing his own horse back."

James: "So this is his revenge or something?"

Ellen: "I don't know. They say he was pretty mad about it."

James: "You sound pretty mad about it too."

Ellen: "Look. He fell on top of me. I wasn't stalking him with my primitive native artifact. I've already been accused of being a militant Indian, an Arab terrorist, and the jilted concubine of a paleface lawyer. The pipe is over a hundred years old and it means a lot to me and I never saw your dad before in my life."

Coroner: "Follow me please, Mr. Smith."

The coroner leads James Smith into a room where his father lies on a stainless steel table with wheels. The coroner reveals John Smith's face and, gaping, ruined eye socket. Even covered by the sheet, the rest of his body looks nakedly old, scrawny and discarded. James Smith nods to the coroner. Ellen Sings at Night watches through the window in the swinging door.

James: "That's him. That's my dad. John Smith, Esquire."

Coroner: (replacing sheet) "Thank you. I'm sorry."

Coroner: "The body can be released from here to the funeral home as soon as those arrangements are made."

Coroner: "I'll just need your signature on the identification form. Please follow me."

The coroner, followed by James and Ellen, returns to the counter joining the office with the hallway. James signs the form.

Ellen: "Why do they call them *homes*?"

Coroner: "They used to call them parlors." (like ice cream parlors)

James: "They just want something that sounds like... not like what they are."

Ellen: "Is it hard to work in a place like this?"

Coroner: "The deceased are not hard to get along with."

James: "If you didn't know them."

Ellen: "I'm sorry about your dad."

James: "Not your fault, but thanks."

Coroner: (placing a plastic bag containing the pipe on the counter) "The pipe has been cleaned and sterilized in an autoclave. We had to do that because the uh... material on it is legally considered a biohazard. I don't think it was damaged in any way but we are not guaranteeing that. Please initial here and here and sign and date here."

James: "Dad's brains... biohazard."

James: "Sorry."

Ellen: (signing the form) "Was he...?"

James: "A decent man? A good father? I suppose. I don't know. He was a lawyer."

Ellen: "Meaning...?"

James: "He didn't engage real life much. He had a good brain."

James: (snort) (cackle) (shudder)

Coroner: (sigh) (here it comes) (not a bad place to work until the living showed up)

Coroner: "Thank you both very much for your patience. I'll show you out. Please follow me."

James: "You're limping, did you get hurt?"

Ellen: "I hit the steps pretty hard. (I'll live) I'm all right."

James: "Why were you there?"

Ellen: "I'm a lawyer. For the tribe."

Ellen: "What do you do?"

James: (I insert foot in mouth)

James: "I'm an Actuarial Scientist. That is, I have my degree. I'm looking for a job."

Ellen: "What kind of job would that be?"

James: "Making sure the house always wins."

Ellen: "Isn't it like that already?"

James: "Well yes, but you want it to be your house."

James: "What do you do for the tribe?"

Ellen: "File papers so we can open a gambling casino on the reservation."

Coroner: "This is not the way you came in. Here is Sixteenth Street. Fremont and the main entrance are that way.

Thank you for coming."

Coroner closes the metal door. James and Ellen stand silently. Traffic passes.

Ellen: "Would you like to get a drink?"

James: "Absolutely."

They walk a block down 16th Street to a neon sign that says "MCs". They enter, sit at the bar, order beer. On the mirrored wall behind the bar is a smaller neon sign that says "Mitigating Circumstances". Ellen lays pipe on bar.

James: "So (gesturing vaguely) . . . you're ok with this?"

Ellen: "Yeah. Hi, my name is Ellen and I'm not a redskin alcoholic."

James: "Don't be so touchy. I'm supposed to be grieving."

Bartender sets two beers on bar, takes money.

James: "I take it back. Here's to being real."

Ellen: "To the real red way."

They drink some beer.

James: "You're not too keen on that casino thing are you."

Ellen: "The tribe doesn't have the capital to do it on its own so it will be bankrolled by an investment group who'll take the biggest share of the profits. Gambling, alcohol and dehumanizing jobs will be more readily available on the rez. What's not to like? We'll make some money to improve social services but what will it really cost us in, you know, further destruction of culture and assimilation into the great American way of life?"

James: "You're a lawyer and it doesn't seem to have destroyed you."

Ellen: "OK. . . point taken. You're an actuary, how's that going?"

James: "The word is *actuary*, but I like yours better. I should put it on my cards. Analyze statistics, identify trends and patterns, assess risks and predict profits and losses. My professor used to insist we did not predict the future but of course that is exactly what we try to do. Or maybe we're creating it. Maybe that's what bothered him. Except it's the future of nobody in particular so it has nothing to do with *actual* life--but it has everything to do with making money, which apparently does have something to do with *actual* life."

James: "I like the math and setting up computer analysis and I'm not good at anything else and it's what my dad would agree to pay for but it all seems very unreal sometimes."

James: (sipping beer)

James: "Hi, my name is James and I'm an actuary. It's been three months since I calculated anyone's death."

James: (crying briefly)

Ellen: "You miss him."

James: "I've been missing him for years. It just reminds me of that."

Ellen: (sipping beer)

Ellen: "You're not too bad at talking to a complete stranger."

James: (looking at pipe) "Why did you have this with you?"

Ellen: "I thought it might help."

James: "How do you mean?"

Ellen: "I never knew my great-great-grandfather of course. My father left me the pipe. He used to put the pipe in my hands and hold me in his lap and tell me this was all we had... each other. He didn't mean just him and me. He meant the tribe, the people. I just... thought it might help... make things better... somehow. I don't know what I expected, maybe nothing. Not this."

James: "Your father is... gone, too?"

Ellen: "He worked high steel. He flew off a skyscraper."

Ellen: (the other way she remembered him--flying through the air, arms spread like wings, hair whipping in the wind, hard hat tumbling far behind him, bound for earth, smiling, thinking about her)

Ellen: "It paid for law school."

James: (this we call cold, hard facts?) "I suppose I'll inherit something now."

Ellen: (don't think) "I don't think the tribe has any actuarians."

Ellen: "We probably need one."

James: (touching the plastic bag)

Ellen: (just fly) "Why don't you hold on to that for a little while."

Ellen: "You can give it back to me at the funeral."

James: "I..." (predicting the future)

James: "...suppose I could work cheap if I inherited something."

Ellen: (nodding) "Not much profit in working for the tribe."

James: (putting hand on pipe)

Ellen: (putting business card on bar)

Ellen: (go now) "Call me."

“No Sign of Stopping”

By Almasi Hines

It was the sound of rain that woke him, not the thunder. Raindrops were spraying the window sill. A small puddle had formed on the motel room carpet. He rubbed his eyelids with the heels of his fists. He had been having a terrible dream, although he couldn't recall what it was about. He stayed like that for a bit. Just lying there, listening to the rain and thunder. After awhile, he sat up. He walked over to the window. He stood there in the puddle. His socks were quickly soaked. He didn't mind. He hoisted the window higher. The voices of customers wafted in from the Chinese restaurant next door. The phone rang. He walked to the nightstand and picked it up. "Hello?" he said. There was no answer. "Hello?" he said again. Still no answer. Then, whoever was on the other end hung up. The man placed the phone back in the cradle. He stood, thinking over the phone call. He ran his hands through his hair and sighed. He walked back to the foot of the bed. The man picked up the bottle of Jim Beam. It was half-empty. He held it midair. He sat it back down. He grabbed the ice bucket on the dresser.

He walked to the nightstand. He fumbled through the stacks of paper and takeout receipts until he found his key card. He didn't want to get locked out again. The girl who worked night manager could be a real bitch. The last time he'd locked himself out, she'd looked at him with such contempt — like he was a mangy, street dog — before prying herself away from the small television on the reception desk.

As soon as he got to the door, the phone rang. He hesitated. The phone rang twice more, then stopped. The man left without putting on his sneakers.

His door opened to a walkway overlooking the parking lot. His room was on the second floor. It was raining harder now. Raindrops bounced like pebbles against the hoods of the vehicles below. In some spots, where the rain gutters needed repair, the rain cascaded like tiny waterfalls onto the walkway.

The man walked towards the ice machine. His wet socks slapped against the concrete. When he returned, there was a girl leaning against the railing outside his door. She was redheaded and barefoot. She wore cut-off blue jeans and a pink tube top. She was skinny, like one of those girls on the TV model shows. She had her back to him. But he could see she was smoking. Gray smoke streamed from her mouth. In her other hand, resting against her hip, was a bottle.

She turned towards him when he approached. The light wasn't so good, most of the bulbs in the walkway had burnt out, but he could see that she was young. He could also see the tenseness in her face of someone who'd experienced more than their share of hard times.

"Hey," she said.

He nodded, but didn't say anything. He walked past her. He could hear the phone ringing inside his room. He reached into his pocket for his key card.

"I like it like this," the girl said, "when it rains. I like to stand outside and look up. Feels like flying."

The man looked at her. He didn't know what to say. He just smiled and nodded. He put his card in the slot and pulled it out. The signal flashed red. He pushed it in again.

"Ain't you gonna' say nothin'?" the girl said.

The man stopped. The phone was still ringing. He turned his head towards the girl. She was looking straight at him now. Her head was cocked at a strange angle, like she was watching something peculiar. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't know you were talking to me."

"Who else I'd be talkin' to?" the girl said. She waved her open palm like she was holding an invisible tray, showing the man that there was no one else around.

"You got some ice there?" the girl asked. The man nodded. Inside his motel room, the phone stopped ringing.

"Guess we can have a party then," the girl said. "Want to share a drink?"

He didn't, really. He had his own whisky.

The man looked down at his wet socks. "Alright," he said. "One second." He pulled his key card from the door. It flashed green. He opened it and walked inside. He had meant to grab some cups and meet the girl outside, but when he turned around, she was already entering his room. He knew that any woman that would walk into a strange man's motel room was not the type of woman you wanted to keep company with, but he was too lonesome to send her away.

"Nice place you got here," the girl said. She laughed. He smiled. She looked at the three suitcases he had placed against the wall, holding everything he owned that was not in storage, and the Chinese takeout boxes stacked in a tower in the trash can.

"How long you been staying here?" the girl asked.

"Just a few days," the man lied. "You?"

"Second night," the girl said. The man couldn't tell if she was lying. But he thought it best not to delve too deep into the girl's story, which he could tell just by looking at her would be a sad one.

He saw now that her hair was dyed red. Her blonde roots peeking out. She looked to be about nineteen, but the purple bags under her eyes made it hard to judge. She wasn't ugly or pretty, but somewhere in-between. And the way she carried herself, walking confidently into his room — she'd obviously walked into places she'd had no business of going before, and likely had the scars to show for it.

The girl sat down in the only chair in the room. She sat Indian-style. Brown scabs dotted her knees, like she'd recently

taken a fall. Her hair was wet. It stuck to the sides of her head.

The phone rang. The man didn't pick it up. The girl looked over at it, but didn't mention it. It rang twice more and stopped.

"Guess you were already having a party," the girl said, looking at the bottle beside the bed.

"Guess so," the man said. He went to the bathroom and grabbed two plastic cups off the sink. When he reentered the room, the girl had already unscrewed the bottle top. He put ice into both cups. He held the cups, one in each hand, while the girl poured.

After she poured them both triple shots, the man sat down on the bed. He took a sip. He'd never had this brand of whisky before. It burned like hot coals down his throat.

"What brings you to Roanoke Rapids?" the man asked the girl. "You got people here?"

"No. Just passin' through," the girl said. She drank her whiskey in two sharp gulps, then poured herself another. "You?" she asked as she poured.

"I'm from around here," the man said. He thought maybe he shouldn't tell the girl too much about himself. Maybe she was a grifter. Then again, he thought, what do I have to fear from some skinny teenager?

"Where you passin' through to?" the man asked. The girl paused. She stared at the man for a second, sizing him up.

"Miami," she said. "I got people expecting me there." The man could tell she was lying, maybe not about the first part, but definitely the last.

"I'm not aiming to do you any harm," the man said. This seemed to relax the girl. God, the man thought, what's this child doing out here on her own. They drank in silence.

The phone rang. The girl looked at it. The man made no move to pick it up.

"You gonna' get that?" the girl asked.

The man sighed. He rolled over on his stomach and reached across the bed for the phone. He picked it up and placed it to his ear.

"Hello?" he said. His voice shook when he spoke.

"Hello," a woman said on the other end.

"I'm sorry for calling," the woman began. "This is management of the motel." She spoke slowly, like she was bored by what she had to say.

"Okay," the man said.

"We're having some trouble with the electricity...due to the thunderstorm and all, so don't be alarmed if the electricity goes out," the woman said.

"Okay," the man said. "I thought you were about to kick me out of the motel," he joked. The woman hung up without responding.

"That was the motel," the man told the girl after hanging up the phone. "They said the electricity might go out."

"Figures," the girl said. The girl stood. She walked to the mirror over the dresser. She looked at her reflection.

"I look a hot mess," she said. She tried to tease her wet hair with her fingers, making matters worse.

"You look fine," the man said. The girl locked eyes with him in the mirror.

"Thank you," she said. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a pack of Virginia Slims and a box of matches. She put a cigarette between her lips. The cigarette hung limply like a sideways exclamation point.

"Mind if I smoke?" the girl mumbled through her clamped lips.

"Not if you blow it out the window," the man said, "I got asthma."

The girl walked over to the window. When her feet touched the wet carpet, she jumped back. "Eww," she said. She and the man laughed.

She struck a match. It didn't light. She threw it out the window. She struck two more before finding one that lit.

The phone rang. The man let it ring three times before he picked it up. "Hello?" he said. There was no answer. He could hear breathing on the other end. The other person hung up. The man hung up and looked at the girl. She was staring out the window.

"You know, I ain't got nothin' against blacks," the girl said. "One of my old boyfriends was black." The man didn't say anything. He looked down at his brown hands.

"Thought my mamma's boyfriend was gonna' kill Davon, my black boyfriend, at the time." Her voice changed to a thick, redneck accent. "You bring that boy round here and I'll blow his fuckin' head off," she said, quoting her mother's boyfriend. She laughed again. The man sat quietly. He took another sip from his cup.

The girl looked over at him. She was drunk, he could tell.

"Oh, it was more jealousy than anything else," the girl explained. "Roger, my mamma's boyfriend, just wanted me for himself. He could be as vicious and territorial as a pitbull."

"That why you left?" the man asked.

"Naw," the girl said. "I didn't mind Roger so much. He wasn't so bad. He bought me things and he won't too bad in bed. Naw, it was my mamma what kicked me out. She found out about Roger and me, and that was, ya' know..." the girl trailed off. She took a slow drag from her cigarette. Remembering these things sobered her up. The man figured that the girl had shared more than she'd intended. But the man also knew that memories are like floods: once you open the door to them, you can't really control 'em, they just come streaming in.

"You ever been married?" the girl asked.

"Yeah," the man said.

"How many times?" the girl asked.

"Just the one?" the man said.

"How long you been divorced?" the girl asked.

"I'm not," the man said.

"What'dya think your wife'd say if she saw me in here with you?" the girl asked.

"I reckon she wouldn't care," the man said. The girl stubbed her cigarette out on the window sill and threw it out the window.

She took a swig from her bottle. The man took a sip from his cup. Thunder smacked loudly, rattling the lamp on the night stand. The lights in the room went out. The man sat on the bed in the dark. He could see the girl's silhouette by the window. He watched as she gulped from the bottle. She wiped her mouth with her forearm.

"You cheat on her and she kick you out?" the girl whispered. She said it so softly that he could barely hear her. He didn't say anything.

"Men are funny that way. I ain't never met a man that wouldn't sell his mamma' for some snatch," the girl said.

"I ain't cheat," the man growled. He didn't know what it was about this girl. He couldn't tell if she was over-confident, naïve, or just plain stupid. He figured she was probably a combination of the three.

"Why are you staying in Roanoke Rapids, anyway?" the man asked, changing the subject.

"Ran out of money," the girl said.

"Then how you staying here?" the man asked.

"I got a friend what works at the motel," the girl said. "He says I could stay here for free a few days."

The man didn't say anything. He was thinking on his wife. How the words had gotten away from them. Their home so cold, they could feel their bones breaking under the pressure. It had been no way to live.

Tomorrow, when I'm sober, he thought, I'll mail her a letter. Explain to her how I've been feeling. He tried to put together the first lines of this letter in his head. No words came.

The phone rang. The man made no move to pick it up.

"That her?" the girl asked.

"Just a wrong number," the man said.

The girl raised the bottle to her lips. The man could hear the whisky slosh around in the bottle. The sound reminded him of being in the hull of a ship, back in the Navy. The girl walked over to the bed. The room was pitch dark. The man couldn't see her.

Could only hear her footsteps. He felt her body make a crater in the mattress as she sat down.

"Why'd she leave you?" the girl asked. She lay back on the bed.

"Cause I killed our boy," the man said. The man felt a rock in his throat when he said this. It matched the brick in his stomach.

"Jesus," the girl said. He felt the mattress tremble. He heard her take another swig of whisky.

"It was an accident," the man said. He didn't say more.

In the dark, he reached for the bottle. The girl handed it to him. He took a hard swallow. He stared out the window. The rain showed no signs of stopping. The girl's breath was soft and low. The man wondered if she was falling asleep.

The phone rang. The girl stirred, but only slightly. The man leaned over her and picked up the phone. He hoped it was his wife on the other end. He meant to say he was sorry. He meant to say that he wanted to be let back into their home. He meant to say something that would ease her pain.

He placed the phone to his ear. "Hello?" he said. There was no answer. "Avery," the man said, "is that you?"

The Deke

By Jon Sindell

Monday: Lunch with the Squirrels

Don't even *talk* about *your* dad, Squirrel—*my* dad's so uncool he puts *your* dad to shame. D'you know what he does for a *living*, dude? He sells *real estate*, dude, do you know what that is? It's *houses*, man, he sells houses to rich people, and gets a big, fat commission for basically doing *nothing*. And as if that's not bad enough, he works with landlords who *evict* people, that is so messed up I don't care *how* liberal his so-called politics are! Now take Deke—*Deke*, that righteous old dude from the open mike! Now *there's* a cat who's *cool*, dawg! *Yeah*, dawg, I *know* I said *cat*, that's what they *called* `em back in the day—back when Deke was *our* age. *No*, dude, *my dad* wasn't *our* age, *ever*. But *Deke was*, and he was already a poet, too—and not just that, he'd already dropped out of *school*, ming! Did you know they even had a slogan for dropouts then? "Tune in, turn on and drop out!" See, they *understood* dropping out meant reaching a higher mental plane or whatever—they were so far ahead of us it's *scary*. So far ahead of *you*, anyway. Me, I'm escaping this mind swamp in a week. You got it, dude, I've made up my mind: I'm selling my stuff and putting a deposit down on that room in the Haight, with the Montana twins—or if that falls through, I'll crash on Deke's couch, he's read my poetry and he thinks I've got chops. *No way*, Squirrel, he's not *just a bookstore dude*, that's messed up two ways. First, it's the coolest bookstore on Haight Street. Second, like I told you: Deke was a *Beat*, man, one of those old school poets who rhymed like rappers—`fact, Deke says Beats were the first *true* rappers. They were even *better* than rappers `cause they rhymed on the fly—and with *music*, dude, with bongos and flutes! *Bongos*, those little twin lap drums, like we saw at that drum circle. *No* they didn't *sample*, dude—they *made* music! Aw, forget it, Squirrel, you are *so* non-retro I can't even *believe* it! Hey, Squirrel, here comes your Mini Me! *Here* squirrely squirrely squirrely, bring your puffy little cheeks on over here an' have some beer nuts! Hey Squirrel Man, leave that brew if you're goin' to class! Four hours school is enough for any Bean.

Tuesday: KFC

You and your popcorn chicken. Thanks to your Squirrely urges, we're stuck drinkin' Pepsi instead of The King! What do you mean, *we* can't go to math buzzed? *I'm* dropping out, remember? Besides, since when do *you* care about tests? Yeah, I know

how *that* is—but the difference is *you let your* parents squeeze *you*, and *I don't* let *mine*, 'cause I know it only encourages them. It's like Deke says, structure is for the power elite, not for poets and seers. Do you think Jerry Garcia was into structure? Yeah, you're *right*, Deke *does* look like Jerry—right down to the Santa beard and those crinkly eyes! Man, they are *so not* like my old man's eyes. My old man's eyes drill into you, like: "Hey, did you do your homework?" and, "Tell me exactly, how do you expect to make your way in the world without a high school degree?" And, of *course*, the famous, "Hey, did you do your homework?" It's like, Deke and I were rappin' at the store yesterday with the Montana twins, and someone's like, hey Deke, you're like Peter Pan, man, you're the leader of the lost boys or somethin'—and Deke just grins and draws this joint out of nowhere, and we all go in back and get high and start this rap song, *The Lost Boyz Rap* we called it, and we're drummin' on books and chairs and everything, and taking turns rhyming, all these *brilliant* rhymes, like—well, I don't *remember* any of 'em exactly, but they were *brilliant*, all this great stuff about Peter Pan, and how they *hook* you in school, like this principal, Captain Hook, and how they try to keep you scared at home, like the kids in the Peter Pan story. *Man* it was cool. And Deke says, yeah, well, I'm *cool* and all that, but I've got rules, too. Like Rule Number One: Anyone has pot, everyone smokes. And Rule Number Two: *No selling*. So I keep my sales stash stuffed in my crotch.

Wednesday: Lunch back of the Dumpster

Weird day yesterday, dude. Here, have a hit. First off, Deke was weird. I ride my board all the way down to the store and slide in real smooth, and I'm all, *wassup?* and he just stares at me like I'm a retard. So I'm like, *he's* having a bad day, and I flip through zines for a while. Then I go, "Hey, Deke, I was wonderin'—what's your *real* name, man?" And he gets all beady eyed on me and goes, "What, Deke's not *real* enough for you? I'm *The Deacon*, man, that's all there is to it." And I'm all, *what-ever*. Then he kinda slumps over and gives me this sad old rabbi look and says, "Look, li'l dude, you gotta scam, the Boss Man got his panties in a twist 'cause some yuppie princess came in yesterday and there was no one in front, and some "*obnoxious people*" loudmouthing in back—yeah, *us*, duh—so I've gotta be a Boy Scout for a while." So I'm all, fine, whatever, and I get out of there and call Ronnie T. He comes over to my house and starts playing guitar, and I start fooling around with that conga my dad got me. So, of course, my dad heads straight for my room with this incredible radar he has for spoiling my fun, and sticks his head in the doorway, with this puppy dog look of his, and says, "Can I jam?" And I'm thinkin', that is *so lame*, you don't *ask* "can I jam," you just step in and *do* it. So we're all, yeah, whatever, and Ronnie starts playing this Marley tune, and Dad starts playing the other conga, and he's making totally sure we can see how into it he is, like he's rolling his eyes and moving his head around like, hey, look at me, *I'm* jamming with my son! *Pa-thetic*. *Yeah*, he *was* good, but he wasn't like *good* good, not *rasta* good or anything, he was just good like you're supposed to be good...like a commercial. *Wasted day*, Squirrelly.

Thursday: Lunch at the Beach

Dude, there's *nothing* like celebrating the end of the school week with brews at the beach! It's *not* the end? Well it is for me! End of the school *week*, end of the school *year*, end of the school *life*! *High five*? Dude, you are *so* middle school! Remember, Squirrel Man, I'll be waiting for you on the outside. *Yeah* you will be! You *will* be, dude, trust me, freedom's *very* contagious. Mm, good brew. Man, it was *pathetic* at the bookstore last night. You should see what The Deke has to go through. The Boss Man put an espresso machine in 'cause he's afraid everyone's gonna go all Starbucks on him, so now it's not enough that Deke can recite Beat poetry from heart, and was personally busted in the Free Speech Movement, and sang folk songs with Pete Cigar and everything, now he's got to make coffee for yuppies, too! Like these two guys in rich boy suits that came in yesterday, they come in and order cappuccino, and while Deke's makin' it, they're on their cell phones talking *buy this! sell that!* and all this stock market mumbo jumbo. Then one of 'em puts his hand over the phone, like he's a *very* big deal and says, "Excuse me, Mr. Kerouac, could you please put a little less froth in my cappo please?" And the other guy cracks up like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard! I mean, just 'cause Deke wears a beret and works on Haight Street, they think he's a Disneyland attraction! I'll bet he woulda popped 'em in the mouth if he wasn't saving up for studio time for his poetry album. And he's nonviolent, right. And sixty, *duh*. Hey, mañana, dude. I've gotta see those Montana boys about that room—and don't give me that weak "it's not The Haight" shit, you can smell the pot, piss, and pizza when the wind blows, so it's Haight enough for me!

Friday: Lunch in the Schoolyard

Dude, you finally put your cell phone on! Hey, I'm sorry you gotta eat alone, but I closed that—*ahem*—*business* deal this morning, and I'm moving in with The United Dropouts of America, Montana chapter. Hey, I'm *sorry*, dude, but you shoulda had your cell phone on! Look, just lay low in the shadows and the bad boys won't bug you. Dude, if you'd just kept your cell on, I'd have *walked* you to K-Fried! Yeah, Squirrel, we will *definitely* get popcorn chicken next week. Yeah, man, I'll miss you, too—those long lunches together ... those cuts ... well *of course* I remember the firecrackers in the can! And dude, who can forget cheerleading practice! And the physics club! And the debating society! And those honors classes! And *of course*, who can ever forget hanging out with the pretty people making snide remarks at the nerds! What? *You* can? You drink too much, Squirrely! Or *not*, considering folks drink to forget. Mm, that's good. Omigod! I'm drinking alone! One of the top ten warning signs of alcoholism! Well, this don't count, it's a special occasion ... *erp!* Lemme ask you somethin', Squirrely: did you ever think about the difference between us and our folks? The difference is, they're all

noun obsessed, and we're all about verbs. Take dropping out. I'm dropping out. It's something I'm *doing*. And it's *just* something I'm doing. I'm *still* Jack The Beanstalk, I *still* smile like a pumpkin, I *still* love rhymes, and I *still* stick up for my friends—always. But to my dad, *dropout* is what I *am*—or will be in a day. That's why he's all, "Don't be a dropout, Jack!", like if I drop out, all of a sudden I won't be "Jacko" anymore, or "best pal," or "hoopster." I'll just be: *Dropout*. See, it's all nouns and verbs, dude, that explains everything. You know, I bet I could ace English in a minute if I wanted to ... *as if*.

Monday: The Last Lunch

This is it, dude, the last supper—one last lunch for The Squirrel and The Bean. *Heck yeah* I'm going through with it! But ... the "it's" different now. How? Well, my last day of school was Friday, right? And I celebrated by cutting, right? Well, guess who decided to notice I was still alive? Dean J. And he called my dad to tell him I cut, and my dad went all over town looking for me, and found me at the bookstore, chillin' with Deke. And it was like, a *showdown*, man, like *The Matrix*. First they're kinda checkin' each other out, like gun-fighters. And Dad looks at me and goes, "You're not in school," which was the *duh* of the day, but he holds back from getting *too* mad, 'cause Deke's there, and Dad's worried about his Dad Of The Century medal. And Deke goes, "Maybe I oughta let you and the young-blood work this out in private." So Dad goes all formal on him and says, "Excuse me, we haven't met. I'm Dan Campbell." And he sticks his hand out for a business-type handshake, but Deke gives him a soul shake instead. And then they start making this chit chat like I'm not there all of a sudden. It was ... *weird*, they were like kissing up to each other, like some bizarro adult conspiracy or something. Then Deke starts talking about how bad the book business is with all the chain stores taking over, and my dad's all, hey, I sympathize, it's a real problem. Then Dad's like, hey, I've heard you're quite a poet; Jack's told me all about you; except it sounds like he's trying to hold in a crap. And Deke goes, "Yeah, The Bean's got a great ear," and Dad looks at me and says *The Bean* real low, as if it's totally lame to be called that—as if I haven't told him a million times my friends call me *The Bean*. Then Dad gives Deke this look and says, "You know, I've written some poetry myself, man (man!). I'd *much* rather be doing what you're doing than selling real estate." And *I'm puking*. Then Deke nods his head at me and goes, "Well, hey, you know, you really oughta encourage *his* poetry, he's drying up in that so-called school." So all of a sudden Dad does a complete `tude 360 and snaps his head back and says, "*Excuse* me? *You're* telling *me* how to be a father to my boy?" And Deke goes, "I'm not *telling* you, man, I've just *been* there, and I picked up a few things along the road." And I'm all, The Deke was a dad? And then I remember The Boss said that Deke had a kid but split when the kid was a kid, and the kid's grown now, and he tracked Deke down and they had a few beers, and I guess I'd suppressed it, repressed it, whatever, 'cause that's not too cool. So my dad's all, "*You* shelter runaways, and *you* shelter truants, and *you're* lecturing *me* on how to raise *my son*?" And Deke's all, "Just listen to yourself, man, calling him *my son*. *Sure*, you *begot* him, and sure, you've given him your best shot and all—but this *my son* stuff is a power trip, man, he belongs to the *universe*—like we *all* do. And sooner rather than later, you gotta give him up to it." And

now Dad's eyes are sort of popping out like ping pong balls, and the veins on his forehead are all pumped up like when Mom tells him to go lie down for his blood pressure, and he's all "*Give him up?* You mean, give up *on* him, don't you! Well I've got news for you, my fine feathered friend, *giving up* is not in the Campbell vocabulary—though it may be in yours." And he keeps on blasting Deke, and it was ... *cool*. And while Dad's sputtering at him, Deke's giving me this look, like he's rolling his eyes and smirking at me. And what was *really* funny was, it was the exact same look *you* gave *me* behind the Princely Pal's back when he ripped into me for board-sliding that rail last week. So Dad finishes his rant and he's all, "Let's go, Jack"—but I can see from his face he's not sure I'm coming, 'cause it's the same look he used when he came to grab me away from that bonfire at the beach last year, and I didn't go *that* time. And I'm not sure I'm going *this* time, either. So he turns to go, and I sit there, and then all of a sudden, this force kind of pulls me off the stool like I'm a water skier being towed by a boat. And I go with him. What? No, it's *not* the last time I ever will. I'll *tell* you what I mean. What I *mean* is, I've had it with his bullshit and Mom's, and how they *always* know best, even though *their* life's so great, they're always, "Oh, the bills" and, "Oh, the stress" and, "Oh, my back." Yeah *they* sure know best, like tossing a few bucks to the food bank and catching a play now and then make them all that—and they like *own my* life, 'cause I'm just a fool who doesn't know jack about what I should do with it.

So you know how he's always threatened to put me in The Phoenix, that last chance school for misfits? Well, he put the fix in with Dean J to get me transferred there, and I'll tell you, the dean and the Princely Pal couldn't be happier, 'cause the school gpa is gonna go up about a point with me outta there. So Dad gets his TV voice on and he's all, "This'll straighten you out, Jack. They won't tolerate any of your nonsense, and they'll challenge you, too. And believe me, son—you're gonna come out of it a stronger person." Oh, I believe you, Dad—father *always* knows best ... except when he *doesn't*—and he *don't*. And to prove it, I'm playin' him. How? By doing the *exact* opposite of what he expects. By showing up at the new school every day and doing every damned thing I'm supposed to do, just so I can look him in the eye the glorious day I leave home for good and say, "See, Dad? I did everything you asked me to, and I *still* hate school, and I'm *still* not going to college, and I'm *still* not gonna be a robot like you and Mom, *ever*." And then he'll see I was right all along, and I'll be done with his bullshit *forever*. Hey let's drink to that, ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ah-ahhhhhhhh-men!

---the end

Jess & Jain

By Candra Kolodziej

Jain came from the field, long stray hairs blowing eastward across his eyes, same as the bent heads on the dead stalks of corn. The shovel swung from his hand, in pace with his step, the blade closing in on his leg and then sweeping away again.

I sat on the gravel driveway in a small patch of hard, dust-dry dirt. I'd tossed away a stone for each minute Jain had been gone, and after two hours I'd cleared enough space to sit. I'd been counting as I tossed, but lost track when a car, spewing dust and exhaust, came speeding down the old dirt road. When it crested the hill to the east I heard it and ran for the house. The door was unlocked, I knew, so I busted in through a snare of light-beams and dust, slammed the door behind me, pressed my back against it, and listened. I looked into the house, but could only see the space right around me. The air was rank with the smell of shit and piss and thick with the sound of nothing but me. All the windows in the kitchen and living room had been boarded. Jain had done that.

Dodger crept out of the dark crevice of the stairway. He didn't recognize me at first and gave a low growl, so I whispered, "Dodger, good boy, easy Dodger, it's just me." I was so relieved he was alive, even though it'd only been a couple of days, and Jain had left him plenty of food. When he recognized me I could hardly keep him quiet. He barked once, and I grabbed him by the scruff and pulled him to me, muzzling his snout with my hand. He tried to squirm away, but I held on. When he stopped resisting I let go, and he sat beside me and watched while I listened. The sound of the engine was gone, but I wasn't sure if it had passed or pulled into the driveway and been cut. I hoped Jain had heard it too. I waited a long time in the dusty silence with Dodger whimpering at my hip until I told myself I was being an ass and rallied the courage to look. Through the single square pane on the front door, the only window that Jain hadn't covered with garbage bags or wood, I saw that the driveway was empty. Nothing moved except the skeletons of the two tall Ashes across the lawn. Their limbs bobbed up and down like they thought it was all pretty funny.

They hadn't come yet, but they would be coming. Jain said so. He said it was all there in the instructions and notes Dad left. I never read any of the notes because Jain had gone through the house and taken them all down, collecting them in piles that matched up with the rooms he'd found them in, and putting them in clean manila envelopes he'd taken from Dad's desk. Jain said that the only things missing from the house, so far as he could tell, were the fireproof safe and the hard drive from the desktop computer. I looked for other things that might be missing. He hadn't taken any photographs, or extra clothes. He'd left his favorite pair of boots, and Jain said there'd been a note on them, said that they'd been left for me because my boots were worn down, and I wouldn't have a chance to get a new pair for a while. They fit, but they were broken into the shape of Dad's feet, not mine, so wearing them felt like

being half Dad and half me.

I felt bad leaving Dodger in the dark house, especially now that he knew I was right outside, but Jain said I wasn't to let him out. I wasn't even supposed to go inside the house, and I probably should have run around back, or hidden in the shed when I heard the car coming, but I'd panicked. I couldn't go into the shed. I couldn't even think about the shed. And Jain would have thought that was foolish. So, I left Dodger inside and checked to make sure there weren't any obvious signs that I'd gone in. Then I went back to my patch of dirt and sat. I counted stones, starting over again at one, until I saw Jain come out of the woods slinging the shovel.

Jain stopped a few hundred feet away and leaned the shovel against his leg. He pulled his hair back into a pony tail and looked from me to the house. It was the same way he'd looked at me when I'd come home three nights ago and caught him filling the staple gun. His eyes had moved from me to the table, to all those piles of envelopes, but his head didn't move. He faced me, and eyeballed the envelopes, and said, "Dad's gone, Jess. Go pack a bag."

I could see he'd probably been crying, but he wasn't now. His face was blotchy and smudged with dirt, and his eyes were swollen and sunken. Maybe it was just exhaustion; we hadn't slept in days. Jain looked to the house, then to the shed, then to me and the pile of gravel stones next to me. His attention stalled on the stones, and I could see him thinking. His face didn't change, but his head tilted left. It was stupid, but I was certain he knew I'd been in the house. He thrust the shovel out, handle first. "I'm dead Jess, will you take this back to the shed for me?" I didn't want to go to the shed, but Jain had done everything else. He hadn't asked me to do a single thing since Dad left, so I got up and took the shovel.

We had come back three days after leaving because Jain said it was the last thing on Dad's list of instructions. "Come back in three days and clean out the shed." Jain had told me this because I hadn't wanted to come back. I'd screamed and thrown Dad's boots at the river and said I'd rather walk barefoot than wear that devil's shoes. Jain had assessed me calmly. He'd always said Dad was an asshole, a selfish prick who couldn't give a damn about anything but his schemes. He'd always claimed to know about the schemes, but I didn't know, and so I had no idea how he could. There had been a couple of incidents. The cops had arrested him once, somewhere south of the state line, and Jain had been the one who'd had to go post his bail, drive him home. But I never knew what any of it was about, and to me Dad was a fine man, even if sometimes he wasn't around. I mean, he was never angry, never broke anything. But Jain said he knew there were schemes, plans to make money even though we never seemed to have any, and that because the schemes were working, sooner or later, Dad was bound to get caught. There was no need to explain my anger. But I wanted to. I wanted to list every injury I felt he'd inflicted on me, on us, even though I didn't know what they were, even though I'd only be using Jain's words. So I said, "If I see that bastard again, I'll kill him." Jain had said that once, and when I said it I watched his face closely to see if he'd remember. I don't know why, exactly, but I wanted to see him remember. But Jain just pulled the folded note out of his pocket, opened it, blank faced, and read, "Come back in three days, and clean out the shed." Then he said, "Jess, it's the last thing."

As I walked, I let the shovel drag in the gravel and dirt, and then in the lawn. Not to seem unwilling, but because it felt too

heavy to heave over my shoulder. Its weight felt dead, my fingers felt numb around the handle, my body felt more tired than ever before, like I'd been running for days. When I opened the shed door it groaned and exhaled decay. My eyes adjusted, and I saw that Jain hadn't cleaned up. There was a patch of wooden floor darkened into the shape of a wing by what I wanted to believe was dried engine oil. There were old tools, and a cord of wood, and the lawn mower that hadn't worked in years, and there were gas cans, and cobwebs, and droppings from squirrels and field mice. There was a work bench with glass jars full of nuts and screws and nails, and a musty Dodger's baseball cap that Dad had given Jain because everyone always joked that Jain was Dodger's bitch. The gun rack was empty. And there was a pile of manila envelopes resting on top of the garbage can Dad used for collecting leaves. It didn't occur to me that Jain might have left the envelopes there by accident. That wasn't the way things were done in our family. Nothing was accidental. Everything was plotted down to the smallest detail. Plans were elaborate; notes were left with mysterious but specific directions. So I just assumed he'd left them there on purpose, for me, so I would finally look at them.

I set the shovel against the wall and opened the top envelope. It was labeled "Kitchen." I pulled out all of its contents at once, and it fell to the floor. The top paper was filled with Dad's scratchy handwriting. Skimming it, I realized that it was about the stove. How to work it, how to fix it, and a reminder that it cooked about thirty-five degrees lower than whatever temperature it was set for. The next page was similar, but written about the microwave. The next was about the toaster, and the next about the fridge. They went on and on, each one painstakingly written, grotesquely detailed. Information about defrosting, and cleaning, and maintenance. Nothing else. I threw the papers to the ground and tore into the second envelope. This one was for the living room, and was the same as the first. Pieces of lined paper with a folded piece of scotch tape attached to the top. How to clean the sofa. Warrantee information for the big-screen. What company would clean the carpet well, for a decent price. I didn't bother reading anymore. I opened the rest of the envelopes and dumped the papers across the floor. I knelt down and fanned them out. There wasn't one that was different. Wasn't one sheet that said anything. No warnings, no paranoid, half-crooked explanations. Nothing about anybody coming back.

I knelt for a long time before I realized it was getting dark. Outside the wind had died, and the noise of trees and brittle corn stalks had died with it. I grabbed the shovel, and with its handle, swung the shed door open wider. Everything was grey blue in the dusk, and there were long clouds stretched against the sky. I walked out across the yard. Jain wasn't where I'd left him, and he wasn't in the corn. I rounded the house, using the shovel as a cane and stepped onto the gravel. It crunched under my old boots. The Ash trees were still. I thought I heard movement in the house, but it was Dodger. He was whining, and Jain was nowhere. I walked toward the road, but stopped before I got there. My pile of gravel was smoothed over. The spot where I'd been sitting was replaced by hundreds of tiny rocks. And I realized then, that I was there alone.

How to Be There

By David Aloï

Seek out a friend in a tough situation that calls for immediate attention. Meet this friend at a coffee shop, an around-the-corner kind, modest, nothing baroque or posh, but rather one named after a one-syllable man: Jon's or Ken's. Wear your red and black checkered flannel shirt, thick and cottony, but wear it as a jacket, and throw on a tee shirt underneath, bland in color, beige or plain white, nothing exciting, you are not on stage tonight. Pants do not matter as you will be sitting, your legs hidden from view.

The time is early evening, post-rush hour hustle. The sidewalks bear less weight, but your arrival is important, your weight is needed. Show up at Pete's fifteen minutes before this friend. Swing the heavy door open as if it were not heavy at all but made of construction paper or pillow feathers. Look at the other customers looking at you and how strong you are, full of such will. Let them see you this way for only a second or two, then become like wallpaper; lower your head to emphasize humility.

The chatter should be moderate, proper nouns mostly, of musicians, politicians, authors, pop stars; they whip by as you head toward your seat. Music, the neo-thereal-folk-grass sort, tinny violin, accordion, maybe tambourine, spills out of the speakers. Sit beneath these speakers. Music is important, contemplative. If conversation gaps arise, the music will fill the lulls with milky rhythm.

Throw something into the booth, maybe the shirt, to establish territory and consider a coffee or tea. You have met this friend in a coffee shop before. Picture what this friend was drinking. Was it brimming with foam like a cappuccino or a thinner glaze like a latte? Do you recall a string hung over the lip of a mug like a tea? If you can remember, order it. It's sure to stay hot, at least until this friend arrives. This friend will appreciate the gesture, even if it's not what they anticipated having. This friend will smile at your thoughtfulness and it will serve as immediate reassurance before this friend even has a chance to tell you why the world has found this friend so down. This is what you want.

It is just a few minutes before this friend is set to arrive. Wrap your hands around the mug of tea and let the heat warm your palms. You notice a ring of water beneath it, probably fresh out of the dishwasher. Swirl the mug around. Draw your name in cursive through the water a couple times while you wait. Better yet, draw this friend's name. Keep your focus where it should be. If you run out of water, ask the barista for a glass of tap—it's free, or at least, it should be. There are a lot of couples here tonight, boys and girls, boys and boys, girls and girls. Notice the way the world works like this: in pairs, the assembly of two humans, sharing their dealings of the day, their favorite building in the city or the consideration of a tattoo on their rib cage, their mother's maiden name and father's oversized Adam's apple, why cigarettes are the least of their worries at this point and the ongoing desire to learn how to change a tire—the need for this assembly.

One particular couple, sitting in the booth over, is deeply into something. It is difficult to decipher the exact words they are

exchanging but they are so involved, it's as though he is singing to her and she is singing to him. The boy, with a foreign face of angular features: a pointed nose like the fin of a shark, lips chapped and thin, has his arms crossed at the wrists. He is sitting across from a blonde girl with pins in her hair holding together a French braid, eyes barely blinking. His hands cross the table into her space. He is close and without even sitting next to her. Once this friend is sitting across from you, make your hands do this.

When you were young, elementary school-ish, you thought the word "tough" only applied to people with muscles and not to a situation, you had little worry: a splinter, choosing between blue or red bubble gum, cutting the lawn, the definite possibility of someone or something in your closet or under your bed at night. There was no urgent need for a companion because you had parents, lovely parents, who were your support. They used the tweezers, they chose blue, they bought you the soccer ball night-light and placed it at your bedside. The other children, on the street or in school, were a source of entertainment, like a top spinning before you.

"Can you come with us to the playground?" they asked at your doorstep, tiny fingers pointing in all directions the merriment was happening.

"I think," you said. "Let me ask my parents."

"Hurry up, it's gonna be fun," they assured you.

"I will. I can't wait to have fun!" you said.

The swings were connected to that metal bar so high up, high like a building. You stood between the two chains, rusted on every other link. You laughed and howled and wound your body around and around until you were forced to sit in the black rubber seat. The sand beneath you was deep brown and coarse. You dug your foot in to anchor yourself but this was not enough. The other kids held onto your shoulders to ground you with their weight and you counted: three, two, one. And they let you go and off you went, spinning, spinning, spinning. The chains unwound as two strands of a helix might. And you laughed and howled as you flew.

Keep an eye out for this friend. Every so often glance at the door when you see it open with a look of excitement, then feel minor disappointment when it's not this friend, because if you keep doing this, eventually it will be this friend and this friend will be just as excited to see you. This friend should be here any minute. Begin gathering your thoughts, first clear your head, think of black space, nothingness, then think of the opposite, color, think of those thick Crayola markers and the way they color things in, full and luscious, ink oozing out of them. This is how the conversation will go; it's something you can't control. There will be things to say and then there will be nothing.

Pull the keys from your pocket and swing them around. This is casual; you are alone but won't be for long, this friend is on their way. An older woman who resembles your grandmother walks by and glances at you sitting and twirling keys on your index finger. If you need to, tell her someone is coming and you are not going to be alone for long. Tap your watch and shrug. She continues

to the door. Wonder where she is headed. Use your house key to carve something small onto the bench you're sitting on, maybe three or four words. Add the date so when years and years have passed and you return from the city to this town for your second cousin's funeral, you can come to this coffee shop with a crossword puzzle and sit at this booth and remember this day. Carve it on the corner of the bench near the wall and don't get in trouble.

A gust of warm air hits the back of your neck. Turn your head. This friend walks through the door.

*

You are older now and move from apartment to apartment. You would cut the lawn but there is no lawn to cut. You would check beneath your bed for an intruder or monster of sorts but, unfortunately, you have yet to purchase a bed frame, the mattress has been on the floor for some time now. There are nights you lie in bed and stare at the blinking red light on the smoke detector, counting the seconds between each blink: eight, almost every time, but sometimes nine or ten. You know you can get this. Your college math instructor once told you that road construction is the only constant in life. But there must be something else. You count slowly and do your best to be sure at the same pace: five, six, seven, blink. And still, sometimes it blinks on eight and sometimes it doesn't.

Your friend looks like he's been working out, his shoulders closer to his jaw than you remember. His hair is doing this wavy thing.

Wave to him. He smiles. Smile back.

Shout: "What up!" across the coffee shop. And then call him by a nickname, maybe made up a couple years ago that you will both laugh at, even if it's just "buddy" or "kiddo." Shout this loudly to assert the comfort you have with each other and to show you don't care if it's inappropriate, that when you are together, you are nobody but yourself. Meet him halfway, between the counter and your booth. Shake his hand and give him a hug, both firm and lasting as long as you deem appropriate—maybe gauge it by how long it's been since you last saw each other. It has been some time; it's difficult now, so many things going on, you both understand how it goes. Gauge it by this.

Lead him over to your seat. He unbuttons a green car coat, revealing a brightly striped wool sweater, alternating lines of white and grey. Recognize the coat and compliment it. Tell him when you were at J.Crew you almost bought the same coat and how funny it would be if you showed up, haven't seen each other in so long, wearing the same coat and how, actually, it wouldn't be that embarrassing. Be sure he knows it looks better on him anyways.

Have a seat.

Say: "For you." And push the mug towards him.

"Ha!" he laughs and takes a sip. "Perfect."

Notice the features of his face and the way he sits. Do his hands look worn or weathered, more so than the rest of his

body? Is he sitting straight up, spine flush against the cushion of the seat? His eyes, are they looking up to the left, to the right, maybe down at the mug? Keep your gaze fixed. Mention the bullshit, it's important. Don't breeze through it as you might a magazine. The bullshit is the majority of life, where the problems hide.

Say: "So what's going on with you?" He is smiling, it might not be genuine.

"Things are tough. But they are always tough. Nature of the beast," he says.

Think of how you found the right friend. Nod your head.

Ask: "What makes them tough?"

"My job, my relationship, my family," he says. "Everything."

Think of how if you had a notepad and were taking notes, this would be a definite note to take.

Say: "I know what you mean. Everything lies in my bed at night with me and punches me in the stomach and slaps me across the face and pinches the underside of arm. And if I ever fall asleep, it sits on the floor beside my bed and watches me, waiting for the moment I wake up, just to hide in my shadow and in my pockets and in the lines of palms."

"It does the same to me," he says. "But I just let it."

Your friend is unusually relaxed for having the world on his shoulders. Pry, be suspicious.

Ask: "Why?"

"Because it's everything. What it's doing is what it's supposed to do, that's pretty much its job. Eventually it will get tired of slapping and pinching. It won't have enough energy to hide in your pockets and it will begin to show itself, little by little, and you will recognize it and step on a platform and scream to it, and tell it that you see it, and you know what it's up to and you're not going to let it do that anymore."

Another mental note.

You alternate between biting your lower lip and top lip. You need time to understand what he just said. You intertwine your fingers and place your elbows on the table. It looks like you are doing that thing where you put a blade of grass between your two thumbs and blow and it makes a sound like a whistle. You are not doing that but it looks so much like it. He crosses his arms at the wrists and then lets his hands cross into your space of the table. He does this for a moment, then leans back. The crowd in the coffee shop is thinning, more folks leaving than coming in. The couple at the booth has long since gone, leaving on their table only a muffin wrapper and the reflection of the spidery lights above. Listen for the music. Let the piano and the drums and guitar talk for a change.

Your friend takes this opportunity to go on a tangent, lets things settle in. He is enjoying your company, you can tell. He raises his inflection.

"Hey, remember that time we felt unstoppable, like the world spun for only us?"

Say: "Yes, that was a great point in my life."

"It was so great! And what about the spheres of light, remember how they floated all around us, how they began locked in our lungs and then lifted up our throats and into the air, how this happened all time, every time we exhaled?"

Say: "I do, I do remember."

This is going very well. This is exactly what your friend needed. Everything about him looks brighter. Tell him something that lets him know you will always be there no matter what, that you love spending time with him and there is nothing you wouldn't do to protect him. Think about telling him that you would take a bullet for him. But don't say that, it's cheesy and melodramatic, but say something so he knows.

Say: "You can call me whenever you want, like if you feel down or whatever."

"Thanks, man. Same to you," he says genuinely.

You suddenly have trouble with the thought of your friend leaving you in this coffee shop. You half-smile for a moment but then your lips level, the corners of your mouth bend more toward the maroon-tiled floor than to the ceiling

Ask: "Have you been feeling lonely lately?"

"Not any more than usual," he responds.

Ask: "Any trouble feeling alive?"

"I work on it everyday."

Look down at the table, at your hands folded quietly. Think about hope and then think about hopelessness. Then ask him a question that has nothing to do with anything but is perfect for this moment.

Ask: "Did you do something new with your hair?"

Pull your mug up to your lips even though you finished your tea a few sips ago. Look at him look at his watch.

"Well, I better get going, it's getting sort of late, the time goes so quickly."

Say: "I know what you mean." And synchronize the lift from your seat with his. Pull on your shirt jacket and put your hands into your pockets. Walk with him towards the door and approach the exit before he does. Remember the will you had when you walked in, so strong, so ready to help out, such virtue. It's still there. Feel it as you open the door to leave. Stand with him in front of the coffee shop. Shuffle your feet to delay the parting. Look at your feet when you shuffle them. Think of how impressed you are that these shoes lasted as long as they did and how they are still kicking and then laugh at the little joke you just made and commit to the fact that if you need to buy a new pair, like if this pair can no longer withstand the elements, you will buy the same ones.

Say: "I'm going this way." And point to the left

"I'm going this way," he says and points to the right.

Say: "I'm glad we got together, if even so briefly. I'm happy we can talk."

"Always," he says and puts his hand on your shoulder and squeezes it. "I mean it."

Shake his hand and give him a hug. Gauge the length of time in hug position by how long you anticipate before you see him again. Make the hug short.

Say: "Alright, well—" and notice that it's just chilly enough to see your breath shoot out into the air. Keep exhaling. He is just as surprised as you that it is cold enough for this. He does this as well. Realize the small white puffs of clouds form into thicker puffs when you both do it. See how when you both breathe, the clouds keep growing.

Give a goofy salute goodbye and begin walking in your direction. He begins walking in his. At about fifteen yards, turn around and shout goodbye again but shout it with his nickname. He raises his arm in acknowledgement. Notice how his shadow grows taller and taller as he walks away

A job well done.

Keep on in your direction. Make a list in your head of all the things you have to get done tonight, this week, a few short term goals. Feel your eyes so wide but tired, pupils so dilated from the caffeine. Approach a corner at a red light and wait to cross the street and regret not saying that thing about the bullet and tap your foot lightly on the curb.

The slide was red and slick and long and full of friction. You took turns with the other kids, each of you waiting to be shocked by the static of your seat. You howled and laughed as you slid down and you felt the fuzz beneath you, like dragging your feet across a carpeted floor or rubbing your head with a balloon—this electricity happening, and you never understood how it worked but just that it did, and when you came to the bottom of the slide, your positively charged tiny body chased the other kids to poke them so they could feel the shock, too. And you howled and laughed as you did this.

The Joys of Watching a Dog Fall Apart

By Matt Farrell

My dog is losing fur and it distresses me. There is no more bounce to his step. The wag of his solid tail is no longer like the wallop of a baseball bat against my leg but more like a toddler poking at me with an inch-long finger trying to get my attention. No more thump thump thump against my knees when I've made him his turkey sandwich. Turkey is his favorite deli meat. Our walks—evening walks when the heat is fading and the breeze quickens—have lost their pizzazz. He doesn't tug at the leash anymore, charging up to sniff at some other dog's piss or a flower. I have to yank him down the street. It's like he no longer enjoys my company. Plus, I'm sure my wife is cheating on me.

Which is why I need my dog's help. His name's Fiore. Fiore means “flower” in Italian. My wife's father is Italian. My wife's mother is dead. My wife is cheating on me.

I try to follow Linda when she runs her daily errands, but Fiore has become a lackluster seeing-eye dog. He gets distracted by car horns or screaming children or the smell of his own breath, and sometimes he just sits down and doesn't move. I shove him to get a move on, give him a giddy-up slap, and a clump of fur detaches into my hand. Fur is tough to get off your hands, especially the stringy, greasy hair of a decaying animal. So then I'm standing there, rubbing dog hair onto my shirt, not sure whether the street light is green or red, while Linda escapes down the block to go buy a new colorful dress or have sex with a man who can take her to the movies or read her a bed-time story.

I drag Fiore the two blocks back to our house and lie down on our bed. Birds chirp and squirrels scamper along the bark of the sycamores. I get up for a glass of water and step in a pile of dog shit on the carpet. The shit and carpet threads squeeze up through my toes. Fiore has lost bowel control.

I wasn't born blind. Approximately eight hundred and forty-two days ago, a year after I married Linda, we were driving home from a night at the movies, happy and in love and all that. At the corner of 39th and H, a possum darted into the road and froze, its eyes set to glowing by our headlights. Linda yanked the wheel to the left, sending our car skidding sideways into the other lane, where a Lincoln Navigator was making its way along at forty miles per hour, according to the police report. The Navigator's grille smashed into the passenger-side window. I happened to be the passenger. The door crumbled, the window shattered, my head bounced against hard objects like a pinball, and my skull fractured. Before they could get me to the hospital, which was less than a block away, blood inside my skull had spilled over my occipital lobe, burning the tissue like acid. So now, my perfectly good eyes send signals through a perfectly good optic nerve to a perfectly defective occipital lobe, which, as I found out quickly enough, means I can't see.

That turned out to be a terrible day.

Because, number one, I was a movie critic for *The Sacramento Bee*. A regular recipient of fan mail. And number two, I learned my wife cares more about a possum than me. But life goes on. Now I'm living off my disability checks from the state, most of which I spend on lottery tickets because I've always believed that if you have bad luck in one area, you'll be rewarded with good luck in another.

In bed, I used to read my wife stories I'd written. She rested her head on my chest and laughed when she was supposed to laugh. I wanted to be a famous writer, to bring joy and meaning to others through my work. Now I can't see what I'm typing and I can't read Braille and I think my wife is cheating on me and even if she's not cheating on me she's definitely put on some pounds in the last couple years.

"What do you care what I eat, John?" she says. "You can't even see what I look like."

"I have hands, don't I?"

I reason that my wife's hostility toward me is due to her overwhelming feelings of guilt for having ruined my life.

Just when I thought everything had gone to hell, I was outfitted with my guide dog Fiore, a black lab with thick fur, a mature dog of five years, not some annoying puppy. We did everything together, Fiore and I, because we needed each other. Not like two people in love think they need each other. We needed each other to go on living, to survive. During walks on summer nights, the breeze shaking the day of its stale heat, I realized I could still function. I was still alive.

But after a couple years, as these things go, Fiore began to collapse both mentally and physically. Soggy fur everywhere—clumps on the kitchen floor that I slip on trying to get to the refrigerator, clumps in my bed, in my sheets, clumps that somehow make their way into my mouth during sleep. The shit on the carpet is no piece of cake, either. Linda hates Fiore. Her first dog was a Jack Russell Terrier named Fiore and every time she hears the name she remembers a time when she wasn't married to an ex-movie-critic-failed-writer-blind-man. Fiore seems to hate me now, too. I feel like a nagging husband as I drag the son-of-a-bitch down the street while he leaks a constant drip drip of urine.

So, my purpose in life has been whittled down to finding out if my wife is cheating on me. I've tried everything. I began by sniffing her dirty laundry—her blouses, her underpants, her bras—for any hint of male cologne. But unlike what the fairy tales led me to believe, going blind didn't improve my sense of smell, so that was a dead end. I switched tactics. When she went out on foot to buy milk and somehow managed to take three hours, I followed her using Fiore, who found every way to fail. He stopped to pee. He scampered up to my wife and gave us away. He tugged in one direction so I thought I was hot on her trail for ten blocks, but no, we were chasing a cat.

How many times do I have to tell you, Fiore? Follow my wife and follow only my wife and follow her at a safe distance.

In response, Fiore would lick himself and lie down, meaning, What the hell do I care?

When my wife took the car and disappeared at night, I ordered cabs to follow her, but this wasn't the movies and cab

drivers didn't want to get involved in domestic dispute stuff. An extra twenty bucks changed some attitudes, and we would zip along in hot pursuit until the driver threw me out because Fiore shat on the seat.

So I turned to my friends for help. Like James, that little shit, the guy who was my subordinate and who now subjects my fan base to inferior movie reviews. I hired him to tail my wife, a hundred dollars a night for two weeks, but he'd return with stories about how she stayed at her sister's place for the weekend or how she was delayed because she got in a fight with the cashier over the milk's expiration date. All of which led me to believe he's the one she's sexing up. First my job and now my wife. And I was paying him a hundred bucks a night to have his way with her.

So here I am. Nowhere. But I've come up with a plan. A simple, step-by-step plan for life resurrection.

Step One: Take Fiore to the vet to see what the hell is wrong with him. Easy.

Linda drives me and the invalid over to Dr. Schwertscharf, our vet with the unpronounceable name. She runs some errands ("errands") while I take Fiore to have some routine tests run and meet with the doctor.

"What's wrong with him? Why is he falling apart, doctor?" I don't say Dr. Schwertscharf because I don't know how to say it.

"We haven't found anything physically wrong with Fiore," he says, speaking slowly, deliberately. "The fecal and blood tests look normal. My best guess is that the changes are due to stress. The source of the problem appears to be mental."

"Mental? You think Fiore is fabricating symptoms? What, for attention?"

"No, no. Sometimes these symptoms manifest when there's been a stressful change in the animal's life, such as a switch to a new house, or the introduction of a baby."

"Well, my wife and I haven't moved, and unless she's hiding something from me, we're still childless."

"The cause of the stress can be any number of things. Stressed-out cats might start urinating outside the litter box and stressed-out dogs might start defecating in the corner of the living room. Some shed more heavily. I suggest you find a way to alleviate the stress. Maybe more walks."

I've taken too much shit in my life, or stepped in it, to accept this charlatan's theory that I made my dog a nutcase. "Doc," I say, "I'm blind. Not dumb." Fiore and I storm out. Step Two: Get a new vet.

Linda, of course, is loathe to help me in any way.

"I'm too busy to chauffeur you all over town, John. One visit to the vet is enough."

"As happy as I am that you're able to see Fiore's shit on the carpet before you step in it, I can't, so I would actually like to fix this dog. Yes?"

She drives me to a new vet's office without another word, donning an expression, I assume, of apologetic humility and newfound faith in my reasoning.

It turns out Dr. Gould—vet extraordinaire—actually has a head on his shoulders because he reports the discovery of Giardia in Fiore's stool sample. Giardia is the cause of all Fiore's symptoms, according to Dr. Gould, and some Flagyl should clear everything up in five days.

Step Three: Write Dr. Schwertscharf a letter informing him that the cause of Fiore's ill health is not mental, but rather Giardia, whereas the cause of Dr. Schwertscharf's misdiagnosis does appear to be mental.

Done.

Step Four: Trap Linda in a lie.

The next day, Linda gets home from work thirty-five minutes later than usual. After my accident she had to join the workforce, and due to her lack of marketable skills, it was the workforce at SaveMart Supermarket. She sets the table, lights candles (for her benefit, obviously), and at my request, force-feeds Fiore his evening dose of 250 milligrams of Flagyl. We sit down to buttered spaghetti smothered in Kraft parmesan cheese. Linda uncorks a bottle of champagne, and I hear the surge of effervescence as she pours us each an ample amount. Maybe the alcohol will loosen her tongue.

"What are we celebrating?" I say.

"Nothing in particular. I wanted to have a nice evening."

My ass, I almost say. I bet the champagne was a gift from James or some other rat. "Here's to a nice evening." I raise my champagne flute.

"Here's to a nice evening." We clink glasses and I take a sip. Too dry. Poor choice, James. I cough to indicate I'm not impressed. Linda plants her glass down on the wood and releases a soft, sensual exhale. For the next few minutes we eat in silence. I hear a siren far off, maybe from an ambulance rushing to a new set of ruined lives.

"James was a big fan of champagne," I say. "Remember James?"

"Sure I do. Your friend from the paper. Dark hair and glasses, right?"

"As far as I recall." I scrape my fork against the plate, tilt my head. "You know, he told me he ran into you a while back." This is a lie. James and I no longer speak.

"Really?" she says, probably starting to sweat. "I don't think so. If he was one of my customers at SaveMart, he probably got lost in the blur." She chomps down on a knot of spaghetti. "You know who I did run into though? Charlotte, my old friend from swim team when I was a kid. She's been living two blocks from us for the past ten years. Can you imagine that?"

"No," I say. "I can't."

In this fashion the meal continues, with Linda sidestepping my queries and me failing to complete Step Four.

Days pass. Linda shoves the last of the Flagyl down Fiore's throat, and I sit at home, sit at home, sit at home, and Linda gets back from SaveMart Supermarket later and later each evening. One day she brings back roses—I smell them the second she

walks in the door—and arranges them in her favorite vase on the coffee table. That night she says she'll be staying at her sister's for a whole week.

"Why are you going to your sister's for a week?" I say.

"To see my sister," she says.

The next morning, after stepping in a fresh pile of Fiore's shit, after slipping on a puddle of his vomit in the bathroom (the puking is a lovely new addition), I decide it's time to take action. I can no longer afford to wait for the recovery of that incontinent blob.

Step Five: Go to Linda's sister's house and prove my wife's an adulterer.

I wait three days in case Linda doesn't flit off to her boyfriend's place right away. I take a cab at six (Fiore pisses in the back seat but the driver doesn't notice), and I arrive at her sister's house at six thirty, the perfect time for Linda to be away at a romantic dinner. I tug Fiore up to the front door and ring the bell. This is what we've been waiting for, Fiore.

"John?" Linda's sister says as she opens the door. She has the same grating voice as my wife, with the addition of a smoker's hack. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to speak to my wife."

"You couldn't have used the phone?"

"I wanted to surprise her." Fiore pants eagerly in anticipation. "Where is she?"

"Obviously, she's not here." She puts a pause between each word. By her tone I can tell her arms are crossed.

"Are you listening to me?" I say. "Are we having a conversation? If she's not here, then where is she?"

"Oh, John, give her a *break*."

I should tell her to get her own life. I should tell her to get her own husband so she can corrode his happiness and not mine. "Look at me," I say. "I need to talk to her. Please, let me."

The floor creaks as Linda's sister shifts her considerable weight. Her dry skin rubs against the door knob. "She's at the market. She'll be back in a minute. Do you want to wait here until she gets back?"

Fiore slumps down on the porch, wheezing as if he just got back from a marathon. I kick him to his feet. "No. I've got better things to do."

Of course I do wait, though, but in the bushes next door. I walk around the block first, to allay suspicion, and then crouch behind an oleander bush, depositing Fiore next to me. He falls to the dirt like a dead lump of meat. I run my hands over his patches of bare skin. "What do I do, Fiore?" I whisper, aloud. "What's wrong with you?" He barks and wiggles his legs. He wants to help but can't.

Then suddenly I know. Linda never gave him the Flagyl. She just pretended to. She doesn't want us to recover.

The sound of rubber on gravel. A car pulls into the driveway. Someone exits the car, definitely Linda, given the recognizable pattern of her waddling gait. Maybe she's not cheating on me. Just biding her time until our relationship dies. I'll kill it for her. I'm

about to stand up and yell, but then I hear another car door open, another set of footsteps. Definitely not the clip-clap of heels, either, but the scraping of rubber soles, a man's shoes. I leap up, pulling Fiore to his feet, the two of us stumbling forward.

"Who the hell is that, Linda?" The footsteps stop. No escape now.

"John?" she says, her voice a tremulous squeal. "Is that you?"

"Of course it's me. Who's that? Who's that you're with?"

"It's me, John." A man's voice. Full, resonant, seeming to come from all directions. It takes me longer than usual to identify it as the voice of Linda's father, with his almost imperceptible Italian accent that makes each word sound faintly wrong. "John, what the hell are you running around the bushes for?"

Fiore collapses to the ground. The air crushes my head. The crickets' screeches drill into my skull.

"What are you doing here?" Linda says.

"It's time we talked, John." Does he have to say my name every time he addresses me?

"Your father?" I say. "But he lives in Placerville."

"He drove down for the night. We wanted to eat dinner as a family."

"A family dinner," I say. A few raindrops hit my nose, my hands. More come quickly. The onset of rain almost makes me feel better, like none of this is really happening, like it's all a perfectly staged test. Fiore whimpers and shivers against my leg.

"Linda." I almost whimper myself. "I know you didn't give Fiore the Flagyl."

"What?" she says. "Are you nuts? You were right there, John. How can you say that?"

"Because, Linda, as you can see, he's not better!"

I push through the rain, away from Linda and her father, pulling Fiore. The world is wild with noise. I continue for a mile, maybe less, then call a cab. Don't shit on the seat, Fiore. Don't piss on the seat. And he doesn't.

Back inside my house, I sprawl on the couch in drenched clothes. Fiore jumps up too, dripping water and hair. We lie in the dark (it's always dark), the rain tapping all around us. Tapping tapping tapping tapping. Then the front door bursts open, and the sounds of the world crowd into the living room.

"What is wrong with you?" Linda slams the door.

I scream at her. I list every single one of her shortcomings. I shout "Speak!" to Fiore, and he barks at her. I accuse her of cheating on me, of sleeping with other men. She hurls her favorite vase against the wall, the one holding her new roses.

"I'm not cheating on you!" she screams. "I've never cheated on you!"

"Then why do you disappear night after night?"

She is silent. She breathes, scrapes her nails across her arm or skull. I can feel her looking away, at the ground, at the mud I know I've tracked through the house. When you're blind, no one's compelled to look you in the face.

"If you're not cheating," I say, "why do you spend so much time away?"

She responds, but her voice is muffled and Fiore chooses this moment to bark. A kick turns the bark into a groan.

"Look at me." I tap my forehead three times. "Say it so I can hear it."

"I just don't like spending time with you anymore."

Silence again, except for the wheeze of Fiore's sputtering breath and the nearly audible squeal of the last bit of my soul being squashed like a grape. I try to picture what her face must look like at this moment. Disgusted or sad or fed up. Or she's probably making faces, mocking me, and even Fiore can see what she really thinks of me.

I want to burn the house down. I want to tear out her eyes, pour blood on her occipital lobe. Instead I leave. The rain has stopped but the wind cuts at my face, and I pant and curse as I drag the dying lug of a dog down the street. We lurch through the darkness along the sidewalk littered with wet leaves, whining in pain, our faces tilted toward the sky. Flies zip by my face, into my ears, into the decaying man they've been searching for all night. While imagining vultures circling in packs above the trees, I trip on an uneven crack in the sidewalk and smash my face against the cement. Fiore licks at the blood gushing out of my nose. He licks and barks and moans and cries.

But then he stands up on his hind legs, looks through my eyes and offers me his hand, and tells me that most of the important work in this world is done by those who suffer.

critical essays

THE VOICES: Intuition Among Poets and Madmen

By Ginny Lowe Connors

Many people address the notion of a writer's voice. Less attention is paid to the willingness of writers, particularly poets, to listen to *the voices*: those auditory hallucinations, or messages from the psyche, that so many people experience, but few acknowledge.

Recently, I watched a video called *The Soloist* about a brilliant musician, Nathaniel Ayers, who was homeless and mentally ill, most likely suffering from schizophrenia. A newspaper reporter for the *L.A. Times*, Steve Lopez, wrote a series of articles about him and eventually a book. He was able to get him a cello and a place to live, but ultimately was very frustrated in his attempts to change the man. Lopez understood Ayers' potential and envisioned the kind of life the gifted musician might have had; but he couldn't lead Ayers into that life. He couldn't cure him. The most he could do was offer him a little friendship, and even that was excruciatingly difficult at times.¹

Ayers' chaotic and marginalized lifestyle was his response to the chorus of voices that rained down on him. Only his music offered him some peace, some transcendence. Since watching that very affecting film, I have been thinking about voices, and also about the power of art: music, poetry, visual art—any kind of art—to transform some of the chaos of existence.

I think we all have voices in our head. We shut them out most of the time in order to function in the "real world." At the very least we quiet them to a dull, background murmur. According to anecdotal evidence, poets are able to hear the voices better than many other people. Or you might say they are less able, or less willing, to shut them up. Schizophrenics hear voices more profoundly than others; but the problem is, most schizophrenics are unable to shut them off, unable to stop listening to them enough to function effectively in society. I suppose religious prophets and seers of all kinds are also people who have acted in response to the urgency of their voices.

When I am writing poetry, if things are going well, I eventually open myself to an inner voice, and the words come from sources I can't identify. I'll look at a couple of lines in the emerging poem and think, *Where did that come from?* Or on rereading a draft, I'll notice a line, a phrase, or an image I never consciously aimed toward and wonder, *How did that get there?* When I'm lucky, these words that spoke to me when I was in the light trance of writing resound within the poem in a way that enlarges it, but does not disrupt it. Sometimes they are the bits that a writing workshop will pounce on first, wanting to edit them out. But I often leave these mysterious phrases in the poem, as they somehow feel right. When a writer experiences that, it's one kind of listening, and the words that came

from some inner world are one kind of voice. Still, the voice is clearly an internal one.

But there are other occasions, usually when things are quiet, late at night or during a peaceful moment, that I hear another kind of voice; one that has a distinctly auditory quality, and it comes out of nowhere, lingers in my mind, and then fades away. It only happens once in a while, and it's always surprising. It never seems to be internal; it seems to arise from outside of me. The first time I remember it from childhood was when I was very young and quite feverish. Someone called my name very distinctly, although no one was in the room. I didn't recognize the voice but very clearly heard it.

Mysterious voices have called out to me numerous times since then. Sometimes it's someone calling my name. A few times I've awakened from deep sleep, hearing someone call *Mom!* although my children are fast asleep or away from home. Sometimes I hear a complete sentence, a judgment or a directive, and again it is not just me talking to myself in my mind, it has a distinct auditory quality, though I know it's not strictly "real." It's not always the same kind of voice either; it can have different tonalities just as real people's voices vary in pitch and timber. I don't think I'm crazy, but this is beyond what most people consider "normal." This must be the kind of voice that the mentally ill hear, only they hear such voices with much greater frequency than I do.

I believe we are all on a kind of continuum of experience and schizophrenics are at an extreme end of it, but their experience is not completely alien to the rest of us, bizarre as their actions may seem at times. A number of people I've asked have had experiences similar to mine. But are writers closer to the extreme end of the continuum than other people? Many have argued that there is a very fine line dividing poets from madmen. "The lunatic, the lover and the poet / Are of imagination all compact," Shakespeare wrote in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.²

Julian Jaynes' theory that poets are better than most at accessing their primitive, bicameral minds is at least partially founded on his studies of schizophrenics.³ Schizophrenics, however, do not have the ability to make order out of the voices or control the voices. They are unwilling victims. Poets often seek out these voices and then work to shape the feelings and images that arise from the part of the brain that does not think logically or sequentially.

Czeslaw Milosz, in his poem "Ars Poetica?," speaks of an openness to "invisible guests":

*The purpose of poetry is to remind us how difficult it is to
remain just one person, for our house is open, there are no
keys in the doors, and invisible guests come in and out at will.*⁴

It seems to me that poets are those who invite the guests in, while struggling hard to maintain equilibrium or to create coherence out of the various voices that tug at them. In fact, that might be the life's work of the poet or of any artist. Schizophrenics also wrestle with "invisible guests," but they are generally unable to maintain equilibrium or find coherence in the various forces that invade

them.

Studies by Daniel Nettle and others have shown that poets, artists, bipolar individuals, and schizophrenics share certain characteristics that are often associated with mental illness. All of these groups score very high in measures of divergent thinking. Poets and visual artists also experience "cognitive disorganization" and an openness to unusual or illogical experiences. Serious poets (more so than people who occasionally dabble in poetry) and mental patients diverge widely, however, in levels of what Nettle calls motivation and emotional responsiveness. In Nettle's studies, the more deeply immersed in the serious pursuit of poetry or visual arts a subject was, the higher his scores were in these crucial areas. Serious pursuit of an art may be an important factor in helping poets achieve a healthy mental state. Nevertheless, a link between creative tendencies and vulnerability to mental illness has been established.⁵

Perhaps Lord Byron understood this. He believed that poets were near to madness, but rarely succumbed to it because of the outlet poetry allowed them. He felt poetry to be "the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earthquake."⁶

Anxiety and joy are both correlated to dealing with aspects of the unconscious. Poets often move from free-ranging playful thought to more directed thought and intense concentration. As the poet continues working on a poem, she pushes in gradually toward a clarification of words, experience, and truth or vision; but typically there is leaping back and forth through various levels of consciousness. Tess Gallagher, in discussing the changes in her own work from early drafts to the final poem, emphasized the chaotic nature of her first attempts and then the gradual emergence of clarity as she continues the revision process. "You have to be willing to go into the chaos to bring back the beauties," she said.⁷ Gallagher expressed her openness to the chaotic thought processes of the preconscious mind and also her motivation to work with this material until some clarity could be achieved.

While reading some of William Blake's work, Allen Ginsberg once had a "vision" of Blake that included both visual and auditory aspects and lasted for days. This experience was a highlight of Ginsberg's life, and he turned to drugs such as laughing gas, heroin, mescaline, ether, and LSD in an attempt to have other such mystical experiences.⁸

Whether deliberately or instinctively, poets tend to live in such a way that the doors between conscious thinking and a more intuitive, subconscious or preconscious kind of thinking can open without too much difficulty. When they hear the voices, they listen.

Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz claimed that his poem "Sun Stone" was written as if someone were "silently dictating . . . from far off and from nearby, from within my own chest." He referred to this kind of inspiration as "the current."⁹

Tennyson listened to his dreams. He believed that he dreamt his poetry and told others that his poems came to him in dreams, in long passages.¹⁰ The power of the dream as a source of poetry is apparent when one considers the myriad poems and books of poems that refer to the dream state, including Chaucer's "Dream Visions," John Berryman's "Dream Songs," and poems by Blake, Sandburg, Pushkin, Turgenev, Hughes, and others.

Society encourages us to tune in to the exterior world more fully than the interior one, but our interior worlds are often

extremely vivid and intense. They are full of mystery and wisdom. If we can listen to the voices that arise mysteriously within us and beyond us, and transcribe them in a way that makes sense, we are tapping into something important and sharing it with the world.

It is when the private and public worlds are synthesized in a way that offers some insight or clarity that others can enter the world of the poem and take something from it. Tomas Tranströmer caught something of this idea in his poem "Preludes." In one part of the poem, he writes:

*Two truths draw nearer each other. One moves from inside,
one moves from outside—
and where they meet we have a chance to see ourselves.*

11

More so than in the work of many other poets, Tranströmer's poetic vision seems to occur in that space where inner and outer worlds intersect.

The surrealist poet Robert Desnos referred to the struggle to integrate contradictory forces that contribute to a good poem as "inspiration and control over inspiration." Like a shaman, a poet participates in the spiritual practice of communicating with mystery and finding ways of sharing it with others.¹²

Poetry Madness: it's what I sometimes call the trancelike state that takes over when my writing is pouring forth from the intuitive mind, from the depths, because when it is most intense, it seems to completely take over. The rational mind is not in control. When the poetry madness gallops off with me, I simply hang on for the ride, knowing that later I can rein it in or more likely, that it will toss me off all too quickly. For someone who's mentally ill, it must be that the horse they can't let go of has galloped off into a wilderness that goes on and on, with no easy trail out.

Poets do have to exert some control. They have to shape their material, tune into the voices, let them carry them for awhile, and then find a path through that chaotic wilderness that will lead to something clear and true. That is the difficult task of the poet. I don't see how a poet can develop an authentic voice unless he or she is willing to listen to her many voices, follow them for a while into a forest of associations, and return to the greater world with a vision or a personal truth.

1 Lopez's book is called *The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music*. The movie based on it stars Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey Jr.

2 Shakespeare, William. <<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/midsummer/full.html>> <http://shakespeare.mit.edu> (accessed 08/20/2009).

3 Jaynes, Julian. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976, 404-432.

- 4 Milosz, Czeslaw. *New and Collected Poems*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003, 240-241.
- 5 Nettle, Daniel. "Schizotypy and Mental Health among Poets, Visual Artists, and Mathematicians." *Journal of Research in Personality* 40(2006): 876-890.
- 6 Marchand, Leslie A. (ed.). *Byron's Letters and Journals*, Vol.8:1821. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974.
- 7 Woodruff, Jay (ed.). *A Piece of Work*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993, 62.
- 8 Piirto, Jane. "The Creative Process in Poets." *Creativity in Domains: Faces of the Muse*. Ed. J. Kaufman and J. Baer. Mahway, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005, 7-8.
- 9 McAdam, A.. "Interview with Octavio Paz." *Paris Review* (1991): 82-123.
- 10 Piirto, 11.
11. Tranströmer, Tomas, and Robin Fulton (translator). *the great enigma*. New York: New Directions, 2006, 106.
12. Hirsh, Edward. *The Demon and the Angel*. New York: Harcourt, 2002, 104-105.

art

Video still from Primer

By Dave Greber



3-channel video installation installed at the Front from May 8th-June 6th, 2010.

Open Arms Still 1

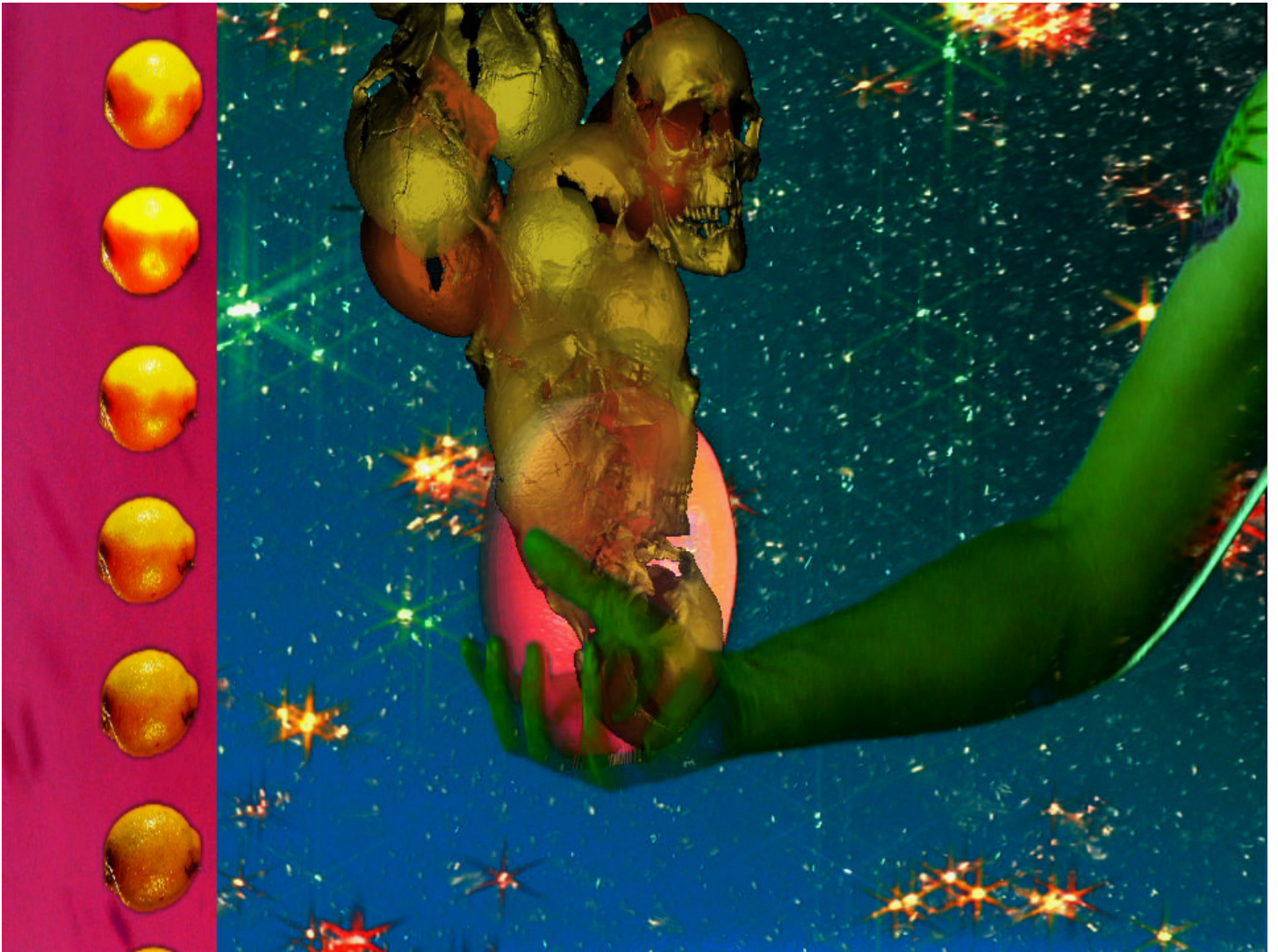
By Dave Greber



featuring Jacob Edwards, Katie Gelfand, Matthew Holdren, Roel Miranda
7-channel video installation
wood, wax, fabric, lemons, CRT TVs

Open Arms Still 2

By Dave Greber



featuring Jacob Edwards, Katie Gelfand, Matthew Holdren, Roel Miranda
7-channel video installation
wood, wax, fabric, lemons, CRT TVs

Open Arms Still 3

By Dave Greber



featuring Jacob Edwards, Katie Gelfand, Matthew Holdren, Roel Miranda
7-channel video installation
wood, wax, fabric, lemons, CRT TVs

Video still from Nano Swarm

By Dave Greber



The Saratoga Collection, single-channel installation, 2010
3-Channel Multimedia Installation at the Louisiana ArtWorks, May-June 2010
Screened as a single channel as part of Heat/Humidity, May 2010

From Dave Greber:

"In its early stages, I wanted Open Arms to be a rock-solid concept piece. I was trying to translate our entire contemporary value system into a single piece of art by using ancient mythology as a sort of Rosetta stone. After a few arduous weeks and a few spent notebooks into this epic quest, I was stuck. Nothing was going to work. I must have spent all of my creativity on my last piece, and I was really a good artist after all, blah blah...

I could faintly see what the finished piece was going to look like in the distance, and it wasn't anything like what I had planned up until this point. I was going to start from scratch again. My conscious was sweating, stuttering and confused while my subconscious was saying, "Put me in coach! I'm ready to play!" So at this point I handed the ball off to my deeper self and he did all of the rest of the work effortlessly. My ego was standing on the sidelines saying "Be careful! No stop, that doesn't make sense!!" Dodging self-doubt and hurdling over anxiety, my intuition gracefully tip-toed the project to its finished state. Touchdown Red Team!

At the press conference afterward, my conscious mind was given all the credit for such bold decision making, while my subconscious patiently waited in the locker-room studying the game-tape and doing yoga."

contributors

Issue 13 Intuition vs. Logic

David Aloï was born in Buffalo, NY. He recently completed his MFA in fiction at California College of the Arts and now works at a non-profit organization. David lives and writes in San Francisco.

Ginny Lowe Connors is an English teacher in West Hartford, Connecticut. The author of *Barbarians in the Kitchen* (Antrim House Books, 2005), a chapbook, *Under the Porch* (Hill-Stead Museum, 2010), and editor of three poetry collections, including *Proposing on the Brooklyn Bridge* (Grayson Books, 2003), she's won numerous awards for her poetry, including *Atlanta Review's* International Poetry Competition Prize and the 2010 Sunken Garden Poetry Prize. Recently a poem of hers was performed by the East Haddam Stage Company. Connors has an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her work appears in many literary magazines and anthologies.

Patrick James Dunagan lives in San Francisco and works at Gleeson Library at USF. He is the author of "There are people who think painters shouldn't talk": A GUSTONBOOK (Post-Apollo, 2011). Other recent writings of his have appeared in: Amerarcana, Barzakh, Big Bell, The Critical Flame, Galatea Resurrects, House Organ, ON, The Poetry Project Newsletter, Polis, Rain Taxi, and Vanitas. Recent chapbooks include: from Chansonniers (Blue Press, 2008), Spirit Guest & Others (Lew Gallery Editions, 2009), Easy Eden w/ Micah Ballard (PUSH, 2009) and her friends down at the french cafe had no english words for me (PUSH, 2010). In addition to his own poems and book reviews, he's currently working with Persian poet Ava Koohbor co-translating her work from Farsi.

Matt Farrell grew up in Sacramento. He received his B.A. in film from Stanford University and is currently an M.F.A. candidate in fiction at the University of Oregon. His poetry is forthcoming from *Arcadia Literary Journal*.

Dave Greber was born in Philadelphia in 1982. He studied media production at Middle Bucks Institute for Technology, Temple University, and Universiteit van Amsterdam. In 2005, he moved to New Orleans where he produced documentaries for non-profits and musical acts, regional advertisements, and independent films. In 2009, he re-invented himself as "an artist" and started creating site-specific video installations for museums, galleries, and media festivals. He is a member of the Front, an artist-run collective, where he is both a curator and exhibitor.

Almasi Hines is a native North Carolinian currently residing in Hamburg, Germany. He holds degrees from Morehouse College and

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Dean Kisling is a high school dropout who learned to type when he was 47. He has been a soldier, laborer, taxi driver, welder, carpenter, performing musician, acupressurist, fractal artist, mountaineer and trail runner. He lives in America and writes stories because he wants to and it might even matter. He is very happily married. His work has appeared in *Unlikely Stories*, *Write This*, and *Medulla Review*.

Candra Kolodziej recently received her MFA in fiction from California College of the Arts. She currently lives in Seattle where she is working on a novel, and writing short stories. Her fiction has appeared in *BANG OUT*, and she has contributed to the Seattle weekly, *The Stranger*. Her story, *Hair & Teeth in Summertime*, is forthcoming in the premier print edition of *Uncanny Valley*.

Nicholas Leaskou lives in San Francisco and received his MFA from USF in 2009. His poems and reviews have appeared in *Vallum* 8:1, *Switchback* 7, *Midway* 2, *Boog City*, *Fourteen Hills* 7:2, and *Transfer* 79.

Ben Loory's fables and tales have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Gargoyle Magazine*, and *The Antioch Review*. His book *Stories for Nighttime and Some for the Day* is coming July 26, 2011, from Penguin.

Libby McDonnell is a recent graduate of the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at the University of San Francisco. She has previously been published in the electronic literary magazine *elimae*. She lives and works in Oakland, California.

Molly Prentiss recently received her MFA in Creative Writing at the California College of the Arts and is now a resident writer at Workspace with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. She has been published in *Fourteen Hills*, *La Petite Zine*, *Miracle Monacle*, *Plaid Review*, *Staccato Fiction*, and elsewhere. She is a co-director of an arts and writing collective called *factorycompany*, that works to make more room for making. Her writings and drawings can be found at mollyprentiss.blogspot.com.

Aaron Shurin's newest collection of prose poems is *Citizen*, forthcoming from City Lights Books in January 2012. He's a Professor in the MFA Writing program at USF.

Jon Sindell is a San Francisco-based writer, private tutor, former lawyer, and dot-com editorial refugee whose fiction has recently appeared or will appear soon in *New South*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Sugar Mule*, *Word Catalyst*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *riverbabble*, and *Word Riot* (in print and read on iTunes). He has seen each side of the generational divide. More of his work may be seen at the

creatively-titled Jon Sindell Fiction:

<http://jstevensonstories.blogspot.com/>